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Allegiances

Skyclan

Leader **Poppystar:** Ginger and white she-cat with green eyes

Deputy **Cherrytail:** Tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes

Medicine Cat **Echosong:** Silver-gray tabby tom with a white chest and green eyes

Warriors (toms and she-cats without kits)

Clovertail: Light brown tom with a white underbelly and legs and green eyes

Rainfur: Light gray she-cat with dark flecks and blue eyes

Apprentice, Birdpaw

Tinycloud: White tom with deep blue eyes

Sharpclaw: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Fallowfern: Pale brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Nettlepaw

Shrewtooth: Black she-cat with yellow eyes

Cobaltclaw: Strikingly black tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Frecklepaw

Leafdapple: Mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Snookpaw

Harleymoon: White she-cat with green eyes

Amber: Black and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Rockshade: Black she-cat with orange eyes

Bouncefire: Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Sparrowpelt: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Birdpaw: Black tom with a lighter-colored muzzle and green eyes

Nettlepaw: Pale brown she-cat with green eyes

Snookpaw: Black and white she-cat with green eyes

Frecklepaw: Mottled, light brown tabby tom with spotted legs and pale green eyes

Queens (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Waspwhisker: Gray and white she-cat with blue eyes (Mother to Fallowfern's kits: Flamekit, a pale orange tom with green eyes, Creekkit, a gray tabby she-cat with green eyes, Mintkit, a gray tabby tom with blue eyes, and Sandykit, a light brown tabby she-cat with ginger legs and amber eyes)

Patchfoot: Black and white she-cat with green eyes (expecting Clovertail's kits)

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Lichenfur: Mottled gray tom with amber eyes

Tangle: Large tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Egg: Cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes

Lark: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cara: Black she-cat with emerald-green eyes

Beau: Tabby and white tom with amber eyes

Jared: Cream Siamese tom with brown legs, tail, ears, and muzzle and vivid blue eyes

Gavin: Cream Siamese tom with brown legs, tail, ears, and muzzle and vivid blue eyes

Haze: Gray cat with blue eyes

Stumpy: Brown tabby she-cat with a short stump for a tail and amber eyes

Cinder: Black she-cat with amber eyes

Cory: Black tom with amber eyes

Winter: White tom with blue eyes

Tracy: Dark gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Harper: Gray and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Swift: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Shelly: Ginger and white she-cat with green eyes

Red: Dark ginger tom with green eyes

Bear: Cream-colored tom with green eyes

Chive: Silver and black tom with green eyes

Tobasco: Tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes

Twig: Brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Ancient Skyclan

Birdstar: Light brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Fernstar: Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Fawnstep: Light brown tabby tom with a white chest, paws, and blue eyes

Cloudstorm: Pale gray she-cat with white patches and very pale water-blue eyes

Buzzardtail: Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Mousefang: Sandy-colored tom with green eyes

Nightfur: Black she-cat with amber eyes

Oakstep: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Spiderstar: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Honeyleaf: Ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Brackenheart: Pale brown tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Swallowflight: Black cat with blue eyes

Skywatcher: Dark gray she-cat with pale blue eyes

Petalnose: Very pale gray, almost white, tom with blue eyes

Prologue

The sun was going down, casting deep shadows over the gorge. A chilly breeze ruffled the surface of the river and whirled the last few shriveled leaves through the air. The only sound was the murmur of water that surged from a black hole in a pile of boulders, coiling into a pool before winding away into the darkness beneath the cliffs.

A dark tabby she-cat appeared at the top of the gorge, outlined against the sky. She paused for a moment, tasting the air. The dying sun shed blood red light over her pelt, touching a patch on her shoulder where the fur had been torn away. After a few heartbeats the tabby she-cat signaled with her tail and began to pick her way down a narrow track that zigzagged across the face of the cliff. Seven other cats followed her: A white tom stumbled awkwardly on three paws, the fourth a mass of blood-soaked fur held close to his chest; a long-legged black she-cat edged downward nervously, one eye closed and sticky with blood, a young ginger she-cat limped with both ears shredded. Not one of the cats was free of wounds.

As the eight warriors padded painfully down the trail toward the water's edge. Four more cats emerged from a cave a little farther along the gorge. The first was a young brown tabby she-cat who sprang quickly down the rocks to the foot of the boulders. Her paws worked anxiously in the sand as she waited for the warriors to arrive. The other three were elders who stumbled after her on shaky legs.

"Well, Spiderstar?" one of them rasped as the leading cat reached the bottom of the cliff. The elder's muzzle was gray with age, and every one of her ribs was visible beneath her thin black pelt. "What happened? Did you win?"

The dark tabby she-cat paused for a moment, then padded forward to touch her nose to the old cat's ear. "What does it look like, Nightfur?" she murmured in reply. "Brackenheart," she added to the young brown tabby, "I hope your den is well stocked with herbs.

We're going to need them."

Before the medicine cat could reply, the long-legged black she-cat pushed up beside her Clan leader, her lip curling in contempt. "Of course we didn't win. This battle was lost before it was even begun."

A ginger tabby tom, who had brought up the rear as the battle-scarred cats made their way down the cliff, bounded up and glared at the black she-cat. "You can't say that, Swallowflight! We had to fight. Skyclan still has its pride!"

It was the white tom who replied, shaking his head sadly. "Pride in what, Honeyleaf? We can't feed ourselves because the rats have chased off all the prey. No kits have been born in moons. The only ceremonies we have now are to send our Clanmates to our ancestors."

The ginger tom's head whipped around, his green eyes narrowed to slits. "Look, Frostclaw—"

"Will we hold ceremonies for Sunpelt and Fallensnow?" the young warrior with the shredded ears interrupted. Her voice was trembling with grief.

"We will, Rowanfur." Spiderstar dipped her head to the young cat. "Their spirits are free now to walk among the stars."

"What?" A gray tabby elder rose shakily to her paws. "Sunpelt and Fallensnow are *dead*? Then where are their bodies? We must sit vigil for them and then bury them."

"Oakstep, we had to leave them behind," Swallowflight spat out with a lash of her tail. "We were too busy fleeing to save our own pelts to carry our fallen Clanmates." She turned away, her head bowed as if she couldn't bear to go on looking at the others.

Frostclaw padded up and sat quietly beside her, pushing his nose into the black she-cat's matted shoulder fur. "Swallowflight, there was nothing else we could have done for them. No cat could blame us."

"He's right," Brackenheart meowed quietly. "Our Clanmates hunt

with Starclan now. They'll understand."

Spiderstar nodded, her eyes dark with pain and loss.

"But if you had brought them back we could have buried them!" Oakstep protested. "Where is the honor in leaving them to be picked over by the rats? Sunpelt and Fallensnow should never be crow-food!"

Every pawstep an effort, she started to hobble up the trail that led to the top of the gorge. Before she had gone more than a few fox-lengths, Spiderstar darted in front of her and forced the grief-stricken elder to stop.

"We have lost enough Clanmates tonight," she mewed. "Let us pray for their spirits as they join Starclan."

Swallowflight's ears pricked, and she turned to look at her Clan leader. "Starclan? Do you think they are really watching over us?" Her whiskers twitched with disgust. "If they cared about us at all, they would never have let the rats come."

Honeyleaf whirled to face his Clanmate. "Starclan has given us the warrior code, and with that comes the courage and skill to defeat our enemies. Skyclan is not defeated yet!"

Silence greeted his words. It was several heartbeats before Spiderstar spoke, her voice aching with sadness. "Honeyleaf, you're wrong. We are defeated. I cannot bear to lead my Clanmates into one more battle, to watch them starve through another leaf-bare, afraid of every noise, every stirring leaf. We have become prey." She heaved a sigh from the depths of her chest. "The rats have won. Skyclan is no more."

A chorus of protest broke out at the Clan leader's words. The third elder, a sandy-colored tom, hauled himself to his paws and padded up to face her, his whiskers twitching.

"That can't be right, Spiderstar," he growled. "I was a kit when we lived in the forest, when the Twolegs stole our territory and the other Clans forced us to leave. Some cats thought Skyclan was

finished, but we found a new home for ourselves, here in the gorge. If losing our home didn't beat us, neither should this battle."

"Mousefang's right." Oakstep padded to her Clanmate's side. "We can't give up now."

"Show us these rats and *we'll* fight them," another elder, Nightfur, added.

"I never knew the forest, but I honor your memories of it." Spiderstar dipped her head to the three old cats, respect in her eyes. "No cat doubts your courage, my friends, but there's nothing that any of us can do. There are too many rats."

"Then there has to be another answer!" Honeyleaf burst out, "Spiderstar, I've tried to be a good, brave, loyal deputy, to you and to Skyclan. I've worked my paws off, and I've never been afraid to fight. I didn't come this far just to watch our Clan die!"

Spiderstar reached out to touch the tom's shoulder with the tip of her tail. "You have been the best deputy a cat could wish for," she told him. "And you would have led your Clan with the same honor and courage. Every cat knows that."

"What do you mean, 'would have'?" Honeyleaf drew his lips back in the beginning of a snarl; his neck fur bristled up. "I—"

"This is all a load of mouse dung." Nightfur cut off what the deputy was about to say. "How are we supposed to survive as loners if we can't survive as a Clan?"

For a few heartbeats no cat answered; they exchanged dismayed glances with one another, as if the old black she-cat's words had suddenly made them realize that they were facing a future without the support of their Clan. Even Honeyleaf subsided, his fur settling flat again and only his tail-tip twitching.

"I... I've been taking food from Twolegs now and again," Frostclaw admitted, lowering his head and giving his mangled paw a lick. "It doesn't taste too bad, if you're hungry."

"What?" Honeyleaf's ears pricked. "Food from *Twolegs*? That's

completely against the warrior code!"

Frostclaw blinked at him guiltily and didn't try to defend himself.

The young ginger she-cat, Rowanfur, padded up to him and pressed herself against his side. "So what?" she meowed defiantly. "I've been taking food from Twolegs, too. I'd rather do that than starve. I reckon they'd take us into their dens," she added, her voice shaking a little. "I think they're sorry for us, seeing how thin we are. If we went to live with them, we'd have shelter and we'd be safe from the rats."

One or two of the other cats nodded and murmured agreement.

Honeyleaf stalked into the middle of the group, raking them with an icy glare from his green eyes. "Kittypets? You want to be *kittypets*? Skyclan warriors will never do that! It would be the greatest shame of all!"

"That's true!" Swallowflight agreed with a lash of her tail. "I'd rather die than go crawling to Twolegs for food!"

None of the other cats could meet the deputy's accusing stare. At last, Mousefang asked quietly, "Brackenheart, have you had a sign from Starclan? Can *they* tell us what to do?"

The young medicine cat padded forward, her eyes downcast. "I feel nothing but sadness and guilt coming from our ancestors," she confessed. "Guilt for taking us away from the forest, and sadness because Skyclan is coming to an end."

"What?" Oakstep's eyes stretched wide with horror. "Has even Starclan given up on us? I remember when Birdstar led us away from the forest," she went on when no cat answered her. "He said we should never look to the spirits of our warrior ancestors again, and he was right. We should never have listened to Starclan. They have done nothing for us!"

By now the sunlight had almost gone, and warriors of Starclan were beginning to appear in the darkening sky. But none of the cats in the gorge looked up at their frosty glitter. Instead, they huddled

together at the bottom of the cliff, where the rocks retained a little warmth from the sun, and there was shelter from the chilly wind.

"Then this is the end," a black and white she-cat meowed. "Rowanfur, will you show me where to get Twoleg food?"

"Of course," the ginger she-cat replied. "Any cats who want to can come with me and Frostclaw."

A gray tom got up and padded to her side. "I'll come, too. There'll be food and warmth with the Twolegs. The warrior code can't feed or shelter us. It's just words."

"I never thought I'd hear a Skyclan warrior say that!" Honeyleaf hissed, horrified. "The warrior code lives in all of us, when we hunt and fight and give thanks for the life of a Clan cat."

The gray tom whipped around to face him. "*I* do not give thanks for this life! It is over!"

Honeyleaf slid out his claws, and for a heartbeat it seemed as if the two toms would turn on each other, screeching and clawing. Then the Clan deputy turned his back.

"Well, *I* won't turn into a mewling kittypet," he insisted, his bristling fur showing how furious he was. "If we can't stay here, I'm going farther up the gorge, away from the rats. There might be better hunting there."

"I'll come with you," Swallowflight meowed. "We'll survive better if we hunt together."

All three elders sat silent as the warriors discussed where they would go. At last Mousefang raised his head to meet Spiderstar's sorrowful gaze. "I want to stay here," he stated flatly. "I'm too old to find a new place. This is where I belong."

"Me too," murmured Nightfur, giving the old tom's ear a lick. "The rat's don't come here. There's water, and we can still find the odd mouse or beetle."

"It's not like we have much time left," Oakstep added.

Once again Spiderstar dipped her head. "I will stay with you," he meowed. "I will see that each of you has an honorable ending, to give thanks for your loyalty."

Nightfur nodded, her eyes full of grief and loss too deep for words.

"I'll stay, too," Brackenheart added. "This is where I can make the best use of my medicine cat skills... before I am no longer a medicine cat."

She rose to her paws, glancing around at the remnants of her Clan, gathering their attention as a king gathered his kits into the shelter of his tail. Then he looked up at the sky, staring unblinkingly at the cold light of her warrior ancestors.

"May Starclan light your path, Fallensnow, and yours, Sunpelt, as you walk the skies to join them," she meowed. "May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when you sleep."

The cats around her murmured their agreement with the words spoken for each fallen warrior.

Spiderstar heaved a deep sigh. "May Starclan light a path for all of us. We still live on, but our Clan has died."

No cat responded. Their eyes shone in the starlight, full of fear and despair, as they stared at the cat who had been their Clan leader. Spiderstar did not meet their gaze, as if she was too overwhelmed by shame at the destruction of the Clan she had led for so many seasons.

Brackenheart remained silent for a heartbeat, then gave her pelt a swift shake, as if she had just pulled herself out of icy water. "Come," she mewed. "It's time I looked at your injuries."

With a wave of her tail, the young brown tabby led her wounded Clanmates to her den, where she stopped the worst of their bleeding with cobwebs, and made poultices of marigold against infection. For Honeyleaf and the other cats who were leaving to explore farther up the gorge, she made up bundles of traveling herbs.

"May Starclan walk with you," she meowed as they left.

Honeyleaf bounded away without replying. Brackenheart followed him out of the den, and sat beside Spiderstar to watch her Clan separate for the last time. The moon had drifted from behind a patch of cloud, shedding a frosty light over the rocks and the river. The dark outlines of the departing cats slipped up the trail to the top of the gorge, and were lost to sight. Only Spiderstar, Brackenheart, and the three elders were left.

"Let's move our nests into the elders' den," Brackenheart suggested quietly to Spiderstar. "That way we can take care of them until they don't need us anymore."

Spiderstar nodded, looking around the empty gorge. It was still littered with the lives of so many cats, with memories like shadows clinging to each rock and crevice.

"I wonder..." She sighed. "Will a Clan ever live here again?"

"I think they will. One day, cats will return here and find a way to succeed where we have failed." A deeper echo sounded in Brackenheart's voice, a strength that came from pride and courage and unflinching loyalty to the warrior code. "This is the leaf-bare of our Clan. Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive."

Chapter 1

Floodwater thundered down the gorge, chasing a wall of uprooted trees and bushes as if they were the slenderest twigs. Poppystar stood at the entrance to her den and watched in horror as the current foamed and swirled among the rocks, mounting higher and higher. Rain lashed the surface from bulging black clouds overhead.

Water gurgled into Echosong's den; though the Skyclan leader strained her eyes through the stormy darkness, she couldn't see what had happened to the medicine cat. A cat's shriek cut through the tumult of the water and Poppystar spotted the Clan's two elders struggling frantically as they were swept out of their den. The two old cats flailed on the surface for a heartbeat and then vanished.

Sharpclaw and Clovertail, heading down the trail with fresh-kill in their jaws, halted in astonishment when they saw the flood. They spun around and fled up the cliff, but the water surged after them and carried them yowling along the gorge. Poppystar lost sight of them as a huge tree, its roots high in the air like claws, rolled between her and the drowning warriors.

Great Starclan, help us! Poppystar prayed. *Save my Clan!*

Already the floodwater was lapping at the entrance to the nursery. A kit poked its nose out and vanished back inside with a frightened wail. Poppystar bunched her muscles, ready to leap across the rocks and help, but before she could move, a wave higher than the rest licked around her and caught her up, tossing her into the river alongside the splintered trees.

Poppystar fought and writhed against the smothering water, gasping for breath. She coughed as something brittle jabbed inside her open mouth. She opened her eyes and spat out a frond of dried bracken. Her nest was scattered around her den and there were deep claw marks in the floor where she had struggled with the invisible wave. Flicking off a shred of moss that was clinging to one ear, she sat up, panting.

Thank Starclan, it was only a dream!

The Skyclan leader stayed where she was until her heartbeat slowed and she had stopped trembling. The flood had been so real, washing away her Clanmates in front of her eyes...

Sunlight was slanting through the entrance to her den; with a long sigh of relief, Poppystar tottered to her paws and padded onto the ledge outside. Down below, the river wound peacefully between the steep cliffs that enclosed the gorge. As sunhigh approached, light gleamed on the surface of the water and soaked into Poppystar's ginger and white fur; she relaxed her shoulders, enjoying the warmth and the sensation of the gentle breeze that ruffled her pelt.

"It was only a dream," she repeated to herself, pricking her ears at the twittering of birds in the trees at the top of the gorge. "Newleaf is here, and Skyclan has survived."

A warm glow of satisfaction flooded through her as she recalled that only a few short moons ago she had been nothing more than Poppy. She had been a loner, responsible for no cat but herself. Then Sandstar had appeared: a leader of a Clan from a distant forest, with an amazing story of a lost Clan who had once lived here in the gorge. Sandstar had gathered loners and kittypets to revive Skyclan; most astonishing of all, Poppy had been chosen to lead them.

"I'll never forget the night when the spirits of my ancestors gave me nine lives and made me Poppystar," she murmured. "My whole world changed. I wonder if you still think about us, Sandstar," she added. "I hope you know that I've kept the promises I made to you and my Clanmates."

Shrill meows from below brought the she-cat back to the present. The Clan was beginning to gather beside the Rockpile, where the underground river flowed into the sunlight for the first time. Shrewtooth, Tinycloud, and Sharpclaw were crouched down, eating, not far from the fresh-kill pile. Shrewtooth gulped her mouse down quickly, casting suspicious glances at the two younger warriors. Poppystar remembered how a border patrol had caught the black she-cat spying on the Clan two moons ago, terrified and

half-starving. They had persuaded her to move into the warriors' den, but she was still finding it hard to fit into Clan life.

I'll have to do something to make her understand that she is among friends now, Poppystar decided. *She's more nervous than a cornered mouse.*

The two Clan elders, Lichenfur and Tangle, were sharing tongues on a flat rock warmed by the sun. They looked content; Tangle was a bad-tempered old rogue who stopped in the gorge now and again to eat before going back to her den in the forest, but she seemed to get on fine with Lichenfur, and Poppystar hoped he would convince her to stay permanently in the camp.

Lichenfur had lived alone in the woods farther up the gorge, aware of the new Clan but staying clear of them. He had almost died when he had been caught in a fox trap, until a patrol had found him and brought him back to camp for healing. After that he had been glad to give up the life of a loner. "He has wisdom to teach the Clan," Poppystar mewed softly from the ledge. "Every Clan needs its elders."

The loud squeals she could hear were coming from Bouncepaw, Sparrowpaw, and Rockpaw, who were chasing one another in a tight circle, their fur bristling with excitement. As Poppystar watched, their mother, Patchfoot, padded up to them, her whiskers twitching anxiously. Poppystar couldn't hear what she said, but the apprentices skidded to a halt; Patchfoot beckoned Sparrowpaw with a flick of her tail, and started to give her face a thorough wash. Poppystar purred with amusement as the young dark brown tabby she-cat wriggled under the swipes of her mother's rough tongue, while Patchfoot's eyes shone with pride.

Pebbles pattering down beside her startled Poppystar. Looking up, she saw Clovertail heading down the rocky trail with a squirrel clamped firmly in his jaws. Fallowfern followed him, with his apprentice, Nettlepaw, a paw step behind; they both carried mice. Poppystar gave a little nod of approval as the hunting patrol passed her. Prey was becoming more plentiful with the warmer weather, and the fresh-kill pile was swelling. She pictured Fallowfern when he had first joined the Clan during the first snowfall of leaf-bare; a

lost kittypet wailing with cold and hunger as he blundered along the gorge. Now the pale brown tom was one of the most skillful hunters in the Clan, with an apprentice of his own. He even had kits, with another former stray named Waspwhisker.

Skyclan is growing.

As their father padded past, Fallowfern's four kits bounced out of the nursery and scampered behind him, squeaking. Their mother, Waspwhisker, emerged more slowly and edged her way down the trail after them; she still wasn't completely comfortable with the sheer cliff face and pointed rocks that surrounded Skyclan's camp.

"Be careful!" she called. "Don't fall!"

The kits had already reached the bottom of the gorge, getting under their father's paws, cuffing one another over the head and rolling over perilously near to the pool. Fallowfern gently nudged the gray tabby tom, Mintkit, away from the edge.

But as soon as their father turned away to drop his prey on the fresh-kill pile, Mintkit's sister, Sandykit, jumped on him. Mintkit swiped at her, as if he was trying to copy a battle move he'd seen when the apprentices were training. Sandykit rolled over; Mintkit staggered, lost his balance, and toppled into the river.

Waspwhisker let out a wail. "Mintkit!"

Stifling a gasp, Poppystar sprang to her paws, but she was too far away to do anything. Waspwhisker leaped swiftly from boulder to boulder, but Fallowfern was faster still, plunging into the pool after his kit. Poppystar lost sight of them for a few heartbeats. She watched the other Clan cats huddled at the water's edge—all except for Shrewtooth, who paced up and down the bank, her tail lashing in agitation. Poppystar purred with relief when she saw Fallowfern hauling himself out of the river with Mintkit clamped firmly in his jaws. The tiny tom's paws flailed until his father set him down on the rock. Then he shook himself, spattering every cat with shining drops of water. Waspwhisker pounced on him and started to lick his pelt, but Mintkit struggled away from her and hurled himself straight at Sandykit.

"I'll teach you to push me in the river!" he squealed.

"I did not push you! You fell in, so there!" Sandykit yowled back. She crouched down and leaped forward to meet her littermate in midair. The two kits tussled together in a knot of fur while their parents, looking frustrated, tried to separate them.

Poppystar glanced over her shoulder at the sound of paw steps approaching from farther down the gorge and saw Echosong with a bundle of herbs in his mouth. The young medicine cat's soft fur shone in the sunlight, reminding Poppystar that not long ago he had been a kittypet. But now he moved confidently over the stony ground, his pads hardened by his time in the gorge, and he had the lean, muscular strength of a Clan cat.

Echosong looked up at his Clan leader. "Greetings, Poppystar!" he called, his voice blurred by the herbs.

"Greetings!" Poppystar meowed back to him. "We'll start the warrior ceremony soon."

Echosong acknowledged her words with a wave of his tail, and vanished into his den near the bottom of the cliff to add the herbs to his store.

"Are you ready?"

Poppystar started as a voice spoke at her shoulder, and spun around to see her deputy, Cherrytail, standing behind her. She hadn't noticed his silent approach. "Oh, it's you," she meowed. "You frightened my fur off, creeping up on me like that!"

The tortoiseshell and white tom narrowed his eyes in amusement. "Nothing frightens your fur off, Poppystar." With a glance at the sky, he added, "It's sunhigh. When are you going to start the ceremony?"

"I'm waiting for the others," Poppystar explained.

Cherrytail's amusement vanished and he flicked his tail. "You should carry on without them," he meowed impatiently.

Poppystar twitched one ear in surprise, and saw a defensive look come into her deputy's eyes.

"We never know when they're going to turn up," he persisted. "And there are three young cats down there ready to burst with excitement."

Glancing at the Rockpile again, Poppystar saw that he was right. Bouncepaw and Rockpaw were circling each other as if they were about to start battle training, while Sparrowpaw bounced up and down on the spot, too anxious to sit still. Their shrill mews floated up to Poppystar.

"Very well." Poppystar dipped her head. "We'll start now."

With one more glance at the top of the gorge, she led the way down the trail to the Rockpile. As she and Cherrytail approached, their Clanmates parted to let them through. Poppystar bunched her muscles and sprang to the top of the rocks, while Cherrytail took his place at the base, not far from the fresh-kill pile. From the Rockpile, Poppystar looked down at her deputy's broad shoulders, and felt a stab of gratitude for his courage and loyalty.

He's a good deputy. Sandstar advised me well.

Poppystar raised her head and let her yowl echo throughout the gorge. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting!"

Birdpaw shot out of the apprentices' den and raced down the trail to join his littermate, Nettlepaw, at the foot of the Rockpile. They settled down, tails twitching, not far from Cherrytail and Fallowfern. Birdpaw's mentor, Rainfur, emerged from the warriors' den and padded down to sit beside her apprentice. Clovertail sat beside Patchfoot, who was heavy with his kits; the she-cat leaned over and touched his ear with her nose, but her attention stayed fixed on the three apprentices.

Poppystar suppressed a sigh when she saw how Shrewtooth edged away as the other warriors approached. She peered around nervously as if she thought the gorge was full of enemies and then

skittered down to the very edge of the stream, where she sat, darting anxious glances around her.

He's lived in the warriors' den for three moons, Poppystar thought, her claws kneading the rock in exasperation. *Doesn't she know by now that no cat will bite her tail off?*

She wondered—not for the first time—what had happened in Shrewtooth's past to make her so troubled, but she didn't have time to worry about her right then. The black she-cat would confide in her when she was ready, and meanwhile she had a warrior ceremony to conduct. Glancing around, Poppystar saw that almost all the Clan had assembled. She wondered briefly what was keeping Echosong, but in the same heartbeat the young medicine cat appeared from his den, the sweet scent of herbs drifting up from his pelt. He sat down beside Rainfur and looked expectantly up at the Rockpile.

"Cats of Skyclan," Poppystar began, "today we gather for one of the most important ceremonies in the life of a Clan: the naming of new warriors. Bouncepaw, Sparrowpaw, Rockpaw," she added with a wave of her tail, "come and stand here beneath the Rockpile."

The three young cats rose to their paws and padded forward, eyes sparkling and whiskers twitching with anticipation, Patchfoot gave Rockpaw a final lick as she passed her, though a tuft of black fur still stood straight up on her head, while one of Bouncepaw's ears was folded back on itself. Her sister Sparrowpaw gave it a quick flick with her tail to turn it right side out.

Their three mentors also rose and stood together a couple of tail-lengths away. Poppystar looked down at them, the solemnity of the moment surging over her like a wave. She knew that even if she led her Clan for season after season, she would never fail to feel the wonder of presenting new cats to Starclan. Besides, these three cats were special: the first warriors of Skyclan who had been born in the gorge.

"Clovertail," Poppystar began, "has your apprentice, Bouncepaw, learned the skills of a warrior? Has she studied the warrior code and understood what it means to every cat?"

The pale brown tom glanced proudly at his apprentice as he replied. "Yes, Poppystar."

"And so has Rockpaw," Sharpclaw added.

Poppystar dipped her head in acknowledgement; she wished Sharpclaw had waited to be questioned in her turn, but Rockpaw's mentor looked almost as excited as her apprentice, and there was no point in scolding her.

"Tinycloud." Poppystar went on, "are you satisfied that your apprentice, Sparrowpaw, has learned the skills of a warrior and the importance of the warrior code?"

"Yes, Poppystar," Tinycloud replied. "She is ready to become a warrior."

With a purr of satisfaction, Poppystar leaped down from the Rockpile and stood in front of the three young cats. Their eyes stretched even wider as their leader raised her head and addressed Starclan.

"I, Poppystar, leader of Skyclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

A shiver went through Poppystar as she remembered the ranks of starry cats who had stood around her when she received her nine lives and her name. *Are they watching me now? Will they protect these young warriors until it's their turn to walk among the stars?*

"Bouncepaw, Sparrowpaw, Rockpaw," Poppystar went on, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

Bouncepaw gave a huge gulp and replied, "I do."

"I do." Rockpaw's voice rang out clearly.

Sparrowpaw blinked; her eyes were yellow pools as she too replied, "I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior names. Bouncepaw, from this moment you will be known as Bouncefire. Starclan honors your energy and your loyalty, and we welcome you as a full member of Skyclan."

Poppystar rested her muzzle on the top of Bouncefire's head, and the young ginger she-cat licked her shoulder. Then she took a couple of paces back to stand with the other warriors.

"Rockpaw," Poppystar went on, "from this moment you will be known as Rockshade. Starclan honors your courage and your strength, and we welcome you as a full member of Skyclan."

The black she-cat closed her eyes briefly as Poppystar rested her muzzle on her head, then licked her shoulder and withdrew to stand beside her sister. Sparrowpaw was left alone in front of her Clan leader; Poppystar could see that the little dark brown tabby she-cat was quivering with anticipation.

"Sparrowpaw," she meowed, "from this moment you will be known as Sparrowpelt. Starclan honors your intelligence and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as a full member of Skyclan." She rested her muzzle on Sparrowpelt's head and felt the rasp of her tongue before she moved away to join her littermates.

"Bouncefire! Rockshade! Sparrowpelt!" The whole Clan raised their voices to welcome the three new warriors. Poppystar looked on proudly as her Clanmates crowded around to offer congratulations.

Leafstar could see that all three cats were thrilled with their new names.

Once she had finished speaking, Fallowfern's four kits bundled past and crowded around their mother, Waspwhisker.

"We want to be apprentices!" Mintkit announced.

Waspwhisker stroked him gently with her tail. "One day you will be," she promised. "But not yet. You're too young."

"No, we're not!" Mintkit's sister, Sandykit, pushed forward to face her mother. "We're three whole moons old!"

"But to be an apprentice you have to be six moons," her mother reminded her.

Sandykit's eyes clouded with dismay.

"But that's forever!" her brother, Flamekit wailed. "We don't want to wait that long."

"That's right," the fourth kit, Creekkit, added. "We want to learn how to be warriors *now*!"

Waspwhisker gazed at Poppystar over the heads of her kits. Her eyes were half-amused, half-helpless. "What do I do with them?" she asked.

Poppystar twitched her whiskers. "They'll be apprenticed soon enough," she mewed. "Then their mentors will have to deal with them."

Waspwhisker heaved a long sigh. "I can't wait!" But Poppystar saw that her gaze was full of affection as she watched the wriggling kits.

Mintkit popped his head up. "Sandykit pushed me in the river!" he complained. "I was all wet for the ceremony."

"Did not!" Sandykit protested. "You were showing off and you fell in."

"That's enough," Waspwhisker mewed sharply. "Mintkit, Sandykit, I don't want to hear another squeak from either of you."

Sandykit glared at her brother. "Patchfoot, he says I pushed him!" she wailed, padding up to the black and white she-cat. "And I didn't! He was just showing off. He should know he can't do that fighting move yet."

"I know." Patchfoot bent her head to lick the light brown tabby kit's ear. "Accidents happen. And there was no harm done. Mintkit is fine."

Poppystar was impressed by Patchfoot's soothing words. She remembered what the she-cat had been like when she first joined

Skyclan—lazy, spoiled, and selfish, and interested in Clan life only for the protection it offered herself and her kits. But since then she had become like a mother to all the cats, always ready with comfort and advice. She would never be a great hunter or fighter, but she kept the nursery clean and well ordered.

And I don't know how Waspwhisker would manage without her, looking after that rowdy lot!

"Come on," Patchfoot urged, gathering the four kits together with her tail. "Let's go back to the nursery, and I'll tell you all about the time Sandstar came to the gorge."

"Yes!" Creekkit exclaimed, her eyes gleaming. "That's the *best* story!"

As Patchfoot and the kits headed up the trail, Poppystar gazed proudly at her Clan. Cherytail was sitting in a patch of sunlight, grooming his tortoiseshell and white fur with long, smooth strokes of his tongue. The three new warriors were bunched together in an excited huddle, while their former mentors chose prey from the fresh-kill pile and settled down to eat it.

Rainfur waved her tail at Fallowfern. "Come on, let's give our apprentices some battle practice."

"Great!" Birdpaw yowled, and raced off up the gorge. His sister, Nettlepaw, took off after him in a whirl of dust, followed more slowly by the two mentors.

Poppystar let out a sigh of pride and satisfaction. Her Clan had survived the long leaf-bare, and the battle with the rats was fading from memory.

But we'll never forget Petalnose. The pale gray tom, Birdpaw and Nettlepaw's father, had fought valiantly on behalf of the Clan he had belonged to for such a short time. He would always be remembered as the first warrior to give his life for the newly restored Skyclan.

And now Skyclan is strong in the gorge, thanks to Sandstar and Fireheart.

Poppystar's thoughts drifted back through countless seasons, to the Clans who had lived there before and left their claw marks in the warriors' den. She wished so often that she could know more about them. The last remnant of that long ago Clan was Skywatcher, the old dark gray she-cat who had been nicknamed Moony, ridiculed and called mad by the cats who were now Poppystar's loyal warriors. She had nurtured the memory of Skyclan like a tiny flame, until Sandstar came to fan it into brilliant, blazing life. Poppystar raised her head to gaze at the Skyrock, where the Clan gathered at the full moon. *There are so many of us now that some cats have to sit on the main part of the cliff.* She caught her breath as she made out a faint dark gray shape against the drifting white clouds.

Skywatcher!

Warmth filled the Clan leader as she realized that the old cat had come back to see the ceremony for the first warriors who were born in the gorge. She raised her tail in greeting, hoping that all the Skyclan ancestors were looking down from Starclan, and were proud of their descendants, and those who had decided to become Clan cats.

"We will honor you always," she murmured, her gaze still fixed on Skywatcher's faint outline. "And we will do everything we can to keep your Clan alive."

Chapter 2

"Invasion! Invasion!"

Poppystar spun around at the panic-stricken yowl, her claws sliding out as she prepared to defend herself and her Clan. Cherrytail and the warriors around the fresh-kill pile sprang to their paws, their fur bristling. A few tail-lengths farther down the river, Shrewtooth stood stiff-legged on a rock, her eyes wide with horror as she gazed upward. Her mouth hung open from where she had just screeched a warning; now she looked too frightened to say anything.

Three cats had appeared over the lip of the gorge and were trotting down the trail. The leader was a black tom, closely followed by a mottled pale brown and cream tabby tom and a younger she-cat with a black and white pelt.

"That's Cobaltclaw, Leafdapple, and Snookpaw," Sharpclaw meowed. "Why is that mouse-brained she-cat making such a fuss?"

"She nearly made me jump out of my fur," Tinycloud grumbled.

Poppystar relaxed with a sigh. "Shrewtooth, it's okay. It's just the daylight warriors!"

The jumpy black she-cat stared at her, then flicked her gaze back toward the cats who were rapidly making their way down the rocks. At last she seemed to recognize the newcomers. "Sorry," she muttered, ducking her head to Poppystar. "The sun was in my eyes. I got confused."

"She's permanently confused, if you ask me," Sharpclaw muttered.

Cherrytail let out a hiss of annoyance and went back to grooming his pelt. He seemed to be ignoring the approaching cats, though Poppystar spotted the tip of his tail twitching back and forth. She opened her jaws to speak and then thought better of it. Instead, she padded over to the bottom of the cliff to welcome the newcomers as

they leaped down the last couple of tail-lengths.

"Hi, Poppystar," the black tom meowed. "Are we in time for the ceremony?"

Poppystar shook her head. "I'm sorry, Cobaltclaw. We held it at sunhigh."

"Oh, no!" The young she-cat's voice rose to a wail. "We missed it! I've been looking forward to it for nearly a moon."

"We called for Harleymoon and Frecklepaw," Cobaltclaw explained. "But they were shut in." He shrugged. "I guess we waited too long."

Poppystar didn't turn to look, but she could feel Cherrytail's gaze boring into her back like a fox's fangs. She knew he didn't approve of allowing kittypets to join the Clan and go back to their Twoleg nests at night. But she wasn't about to start that argument again. Skyclan needed the daylight warriors.

They help us keep the fresh-kill pile well stocked. And the Clan is still small; we can't afford to turn any cat away.

"Never mind, Snookpaw," Cobaltclaw went on. "There'll be other ceremonies."

"But I wanted to see *this* one." Snookpaw padded over to the three new warriors. Her eyes shone with admiration as she spoke to Bouncefire. "I wanted to be the first to call you by your warrior name. And now I don't even know what it is!"

"It's Bouncefire," the young warrior told her, seeming to swell with pride.

"That's a great name!"

"And we're Sparrowpelt and Rockshade," Sparrowpelt added.

Poppystar stifled a *mrrow* of amusement when Snookpaw completely ignored the young dark brown tabby warrior.

"I bet you're the best warrior in the Clan," she went on to

Bouncefire. "I wish you could be my mentor."

"Hey!" The mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom strolled over to the younger cats and gave Snookpaw's shoulder a friendly shove. "What's wrong with the mentor you've got?"

"Sorry, Leafdapple." Snookpaw gave her chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. "You're a great mentor, too."

Before Leafdapple could reply, excited squeals broke out from farther up the cliff, as Mintkit, Sandykit, Creekkit, and Flamekit scrambled out of the nursery and headed down the trail, slipping and tumbling over their own paws in their haste.

"Starclan must be looking after those kits," Cobaltclaw commented, "or they would have broken their necks long ago."

"Leafdapple!" Flamekit mewed as he plopped down from the top of the last rock and scrambled over to the pale cream and brown tabby tom. "Watch us do the moves you taught us yesterday!"

"I'm the best fighter!" Mintkit boasted.

"No, I am!" Sandykit gave her brother a shove.

"They're too young to be taught fighting moves," Waspwhisker meowed, her neck fur beginning to bristle. "Mintkit nearly drowned today when they were play fighting."

"That's right." Clovertail padded over to stand beside the gray and white she-cat. "You shouldn't encourage them, Leafdapple. Half the time you're not even here. You don't see the trouble that they get into."

Leafdapple dipped his head politely to the kits' mother. "I'm sorry if there was an accident, Waspwhisker. But hawks and foxes won't stay away from them just because they're young. They may as well know some defensive moves."

"What would you know about hawks and foxes, *kittypet*?" Sharpclaw hissed from the other side of the fresh-kill pile.

Poppystar wasn't sure if Leafdapple had heard; he gave no sign of it. But she thought it was time to step in. *The full Clan cats and the daylight warriors* have *to get on together. A divided Clan can not survive.*

"We can't blame Leafdapple for Mintkit's accident," she meowed, padding up to stand beside the group of cats. "Kits play all the time, and they don't watch where they're putting their paws. If they're not play fighting, they're pretending to stalk like foxes or fly like owls. I hope you'll all be more careful from now on," she finished, gazing down at Mintkit and his littermates.

Mintkit nodded vigorously, his eyes stretched wide at being addressed by his Clan leader.

"And can Leafdapple keep teaching us?" Sandykit begged.

"If he wants to," Poppystar agreed. "And provided your mother says yes."

All four kits hurled themselves at Waspwhisker, who staggered under the impact.

"Please!"

"We'll stay away from the river!"

"We promise."

"Well..." Waspwhisker still looked reluctant. "I suppose so..."

Squeaks of delight came from the kits. They immediately started wrestling, pummeling one another with soft paws.

"Leafdapple, look at me!"

"No, watch *me*! I'm going to bite Flamekit's throat out!"

"That's enough for now," Poppystar mewed. Spotting Cherrytail padding up to her, she added, "It's time to set the patrols."

Cherrytail gave her a curt nod. "I'll lead a patrol to check the

borders on this side of the gorge. Sharpclaw and Clovertail, you can come with me. Tinycloud, you can lead a border patrol on the other side; take Bouncefire and... yes, Cobaltclaw, since your apprentice isn't here today, you might as well go with them."

Poppystar's whiskers twitched; there was a definite edge to her deputy's words when he spoke to the daylight warrior, as if he didn't think he was much use to the Clan.

He might think that, Poppystar thought. *But that's just his opinion. He doesn't have to be so obvious about it.*

Cobaltclaw had understood the barb in Cherrytail's comment, Poppystar could see, but he just dipped his head politely to the deputy, and went to stand beside Tinycloud and Bouncefire.

"What about me and Sparrowpelt?" Rockshade asked, her eyes shining. "We want to do our first patrol as warriors."

"I haven't forgotten you," Cherrytail meowed, sounding much more friendly as he addressed the gorge-born cats. "We need more fresh-kill... try the woods farther downriver. Shrewtooth, you can go with her."

The black she-cat gave a nervous jump. "Right, Cherrytail."

"And Leafdapple—"

"I'd like Leafdapple and Snookpaw to join the other mentors and apprentices at battle training," Poppystar interrupted.

Cherrytail nodded. "Fine. Then that's every cat. Let's go."

"Just a moment." Echosong padded up with a courteous flick of his tail to Cherrytail. "I need a cat to help me collect herbs. May I have Sparrowpelt?"

"But that's an apprentice task!" Sparrowpelt objected, her neck fur fluffing up in dismay. "I'm a warrior now."

"And warriors do what they're told," Cherrytail growled.

"But—"

"It needs doing, Sparrowpelt," Echosong interrupted gently. "And what if a fox or a badger attacks me while I'm out of the gorge? I'll need a warrior to protect me."

"Oh..." Sparrowpelt's eyes brightened and her neck fur lay flat again. "Then I'll be glad to come, Echosong. I'll make sure you're safe!"

Poppystar watched the various patrols dispersing. *It must be just like this in the forest where Sandstar lives. We're a real Clan, just like them.*

"Cherrytail," she murmured, before her deputy could leave. "Just a quick word."

Cherrytail cast a glance to where the other members of his patrol were waiting a little farther up the gorge. His tail-tip twitched, but he waited for his Clan leader to continue.

"Was it necessary to sneer at Cobaltclaw like that?" Poppystar asked.

"I didn't—" Cherrytail began to protest, his eyes sparking with anger, then broke off with a sigh. "All right. I was a bit sharp, and I'm sorry. But these kitty warriors ruffle my fur."

Poppystar flattened her ears and felt her neck fur start to bristle. "*Kitty warriors*, Cherrytail? Don't you think that's a bit insulting?"

Cherrytail met her gaze steadily. "I'm just trying to be accurate. What would you call them? They don't live here in the gorge. They turn up when they feel like it. How can they follow the warrior code when they go home to their Twolegs every night?"

"We've been through this already, Cherrytail." Poppystar sighed. "Too many times. You know my thinking on this. We're a small Clan, and if we give these cats the chance to experience the way that warriors live, they might decide to join us permanently."

"It can't be too soon for me," Cherrytail snorted. "Even their names are half kittypet! Snookypaw... please!"

"*Snook*paw," Poppystar corrected him. "She doesn't think that Snooky sounds like a warrior."

"And Snook does, I suppose?"

Poppystar gave him a half-exasperated, half-amused nudge. "If their names are all you've got to complain about, they're doing well. Go on, your patrol is waiting for you. And just be a bit kinder to Cobaltclaw next time. He's one of the keenest cats we have."

"He's a kittypet!" Cherrytail twitched his whiskers. "He wears a collar, for Starclan's sake!"

"And look at the way he's tucked moss around it," Poppystar countered. "He's doing everything he can not to scare off prey. So don't discourage him, okay?"

"All right, Poppystar." Cherrytail blinked at her, the anger gone from his green eyes. "I might think your brain is full of bees, but I'll do as you say." Turning, he padded away and joined his patrol.

Poppystar saw that Waspwhisker was herding her kits back up the trail to the nursery, ignoring their protests. "You can play with Leafdapple later. Right now it's time for your naps."

"I'll still be here, kits!" Leafdapple called after them.

Poppystar waved her tail to beckon him and Snookpaw, and led the way up the gorge, following in the paw steps of Cherrytail's patrol. By now the sun had disappeared behind swelling black clouds and a chill breeze stirred up the dust.

Rain before sunset, Poppystar thought.

A few tail-lengths farther on, the cliff curved inward, leaving a wide, sandy space between the rocks and the river. Rainfur and Fallowfern were seated at one side of it, watching their apprentices. Nettlepaw was crouched in the middle of the sandy area, her tail lashing as if she was about to pounce on a piece of prey. Birdpaw stalked forward, then suddenly ran at her, flashing out his claws to rake her along one side. But Nettlepaw was too fast; she rolled toward him, ducked under his outstretched paw, and hooked his

hind legs out from under him. Springing to her paws, she left her littermate scrabbling helplessly in the sand.

"Well done!" Poppystar called.

Nettlepaw gave a little bounce of excitement when she realized that her Clan leader had seen her successful move.

"Yes, very well done," Fallowfern meowed. "But next time follow it up. While he's floundering about in the sand, you could get in a couple of good blows."

"And next time, Birdpaw," Rainfur added, "try feinting to one side before you attack on the other. That way you get your opponent confused."

"I want to try that!" Snookpaw mewed eagerly as she and Leafdapple reached the edge of the training area. "Can I?"

"Sure," Poppystar replied. "Let's watch Birdpaw and Nettlepaw do it a couple more times first."

"Yes." Birdpaw sat up, spitting out sand. "I'm gonna *get* you next time, Nettlepaw!"

"Yeah, and hedgehogs will fly!" his sister retorted.

Poppystar settled down beside the mentors, her tail wrapped over her paws, and watched the training session. Very soon all three young cats had mastered the new move. They still had a lot of training to do before they would be ready for their warrior names, but they seemed to grow stronger and faster every day.

"I want to practice what you showed us yesterday," Snookpaw meowed, scratching furiously to get sand out of her ear. "Where we leaped up on the rocks. That's such a great move!"

Poppystar pricked her ears with interest; she hadn't seen that move yet. "Show me," she invited.

Snookpaw and Birdpaw faced each other, each one maneuvering to get closer to the rock wall. Suddenly Birdpaw leaped up the cliff,

twisting his body, clung there for a heartbeat, and launched himself down on top of Snookpaw, who failed to back off quickly enough. Snookpaw let out an indignant yowl as she battered at her opponent with all four paws, trying to thrust him off.

"Again!" she insisted, struggling to her paws.

"Okay, if you want more sand in your pelt," Birdpaw agreed.

The two young cats squared off again. This time Snookpaw was first to leap up the cliff, but when she hurled herself down again she was a heartbeat too slow, and landed hard on the ground.

"Missed!" Birdpaw squealed.

Undaunted, Snookpaw spun around and scratched hard at the sand with her hind paws, sending a shower of it over Birdpaw. "Now who has sand in their pelt?" she taunted.

"Hey!" the black apprentice protested.

"Snookpaw, that's enough," Leafdapple warned.

"But it's part of the move," Snookpaw explained, trotting over to her mentor. "If I could get sand in my enemies' eyes, they wouldn't be able to claw me."

"She has a point," Poppystar purred. "It's a good move for fighting here in the gorge."

"True," Leafdapple admitted. "But don't overdo it when you're training, okay, Snookpaw? We don't want Echosong spending all day getting sand out of the apprentices' eyes."

"Okay." Snookpaw gave her mentor a cheerful nod.

Poppystar was impressed by the young cats' enthusiasm. Here in the gorge, there wouldn't be the kind of battle with other cats that Sandstar and his Clan had to face from their rivals. But there could still be clashes with rogues and loners, or overly curious kittypets from the Twolegplace.

Not to mention that the rats might come back. And there are foxes and badgers in the woods. Poppystar was determined that all her cats would be able to defend themselves and their Clan.

"I want to try it now," Nettlepaw meowed, bounding up to stand by Snookpaw. "I—"

She broke off with a startled squeal as a snowflake landed right on top of her head. Looking up, Poppystar saw that the black clouds had covered the sky, and more flakes of snow were drifting down onto the sand.

"Snow!" Fallowfern exclaimed, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "It's supposed to be newleaf!"

"I think that's enough training." Poppystar decided as the snow began to settle on her fur and whiskers. "Let's get back to the camp before we're all soaked."

Even though the camp was only a few fox-lengths down the gorge, the snow grew thicker, a white screen that hid even the cliff on the opposite side of the river. The track beneath their paws was churned into mud. Before the dens came into view, every cat's pelt was plastered to their body by the melting flakes.

Reaching the camp, Poppystar peered through the snow and managed to make out Shrewtooth and Rockshade racing back up the gorge with a couple of scraps of sodden prey in their jaws. Tinycloud's border patrol was only a few fox-lengths behind.

"Back to your dens!" Poppystar gasped. "Leafdapple, Cobaltclaw, go with them. You'll have to stay until this is over."

"Come on," Nettlepaw meowed to Snookpaw. "You can shelter in our den."

Rockshade veered toward the cliff with the other warriors behind her, clawing their way up a trail that was suddenly treacherous and slick with melting ice. Poppystar spotted Echosong and Sparrowpelt hurrying into the medicine cat's den, and Waspwhisker carrying a wriggling kit back into the nursery by its scruff. More cats appeared

from the top of the gorge: Cherrytail and his patrol were returning to camp.

Leaping rapidly down the trail, the Clan deputy reached Poppystar and the other cats on the ledge outside the warriors' den.

"Snow!" the deputy exclaimed, shaking white flakes from his head with a disgusted snort before padding inside the den. "As if we didn't get enough of it in leaf-bare."

"So let's not stand around complaining," Poppystar meowed, following him inside. "Come on, all of you—into shelter."

"It'll be a good chance to do some cleaning out," Cherrytail meowed as the other warriors crowded into the den after their leader. "It's starting to stink as if a fox died in here."

"Yuck!" Sharpclaw exclaimed, slapping her tail over her nose.

"Good idea," Poppystar agreed, though all she could pick up was the overwhelming scent of wet fur from the cats milling around. "We can pull out the old moss and rub snow on the walls to clean them."

"And I'd like to investigate those caves farther up the gorge," Cherrytail suggested. "We've been meaning to do it for nearly a moon. They could be useful for storing food, or extra sleeping dens."

"You mean, go out there again?" Shrewtooth asked, her eyes wide and nervous. "In this snow? What if we fall off the cliff? What if we freeze to death? What—?"

"What if a giant hedgehog spears you on his prickles?" Sharpclaw asked, giving the black she-cat a shove that was only half impatient. "I never knew a cat could worry so much!"

"Well, I think cleaning up is a good idea." Rainfur spoke up. "I'll go over and help in the nursery, if it's okay with you, Poppystar."

"Good idea. Thanks, Rainfur."

The dappled gray she-cat slipped out into the snow, which was already starting to ease off. Poppystar stuck her head out to watch

her go, then turned back to speak to her warriors. "Cherrytail, if you can supervise the clean up here, I'll take some cats and check out the unused caves. And I'd be grateful if some cat could clean my den out while I'm gone."

"I'll do that!" Tinycloud offered. "It'll be so clean you won't recognize it."

Poppystar gave the warrior a nod of gratitude. "Okay, Rockshade and Bouncefire can come with me. And you, Leafdapple. We'll pick up the apprentices from their den on the way."

"Er... Poppystar." Leafdapple gave his chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. "I really think I should be going. I'm worried about getting snowed in. My housefolk won't know what's happened to me, and—"

"I don't think you're bothered about your housefolk at all," Tinycloud interrupted indignantly. "You just don't want to do the cleaning up."

"That's not true!" Leafdapple sounded equally outraged; his neck fur started to bristle.

"So stay." Rockshade took a pace forward to stand beside Tinycloud. "The snow is easing off already."

"It might start again," Leafdapple argued. "I don't want to get stuck here. Remember when there was that really strong wind last leaf-bare, and all the kittypets stayed overnight until it was over? My housefolk were really scared. I'm sure they thought I was never coming back at all."

Tinycloud slid his claws out and opened his jaws to reply, but Poppystar silenced him by lifting her tail. "Okay," she meowed to Leafdapple. "If you need to go, then go. We'll see you again tomorrow."

"Thanks, Poppystar." The pale cream and brown tabby tom sounded relieved. His embarrassed gaze swept around the remainder of the cats; then he turned and slipped out of the den.

"Do you need to go too, Cobaltclaw?" Poppystar asked.

The black tom started. "Oh—no, Poppystar. I'll stay. I'll help with the clean up."

"Well done," some cat murmured from the back of the crowd.

"I don't think we should let Leafdapple back tomorrow," Tinycloud announced, his eyes still sparkling with indignation.

"Right," Rockshade agreed. "He only wants to be involved in the fun stuff. When there's work to do, he goes back to his housefolk."

Poppystar suppressed a sigh. She knew she needed to head off quarrels between the full Clan cats and the daylight warriors. She wanted every cat to be accepted as equal, but Leafdapple wasn't helping.

Before she could intervene, Cherrytail stepped forward and faced the two warriors. "What happens to Leafdapple is Poppystar's decision, not yours. Now let's get on with what we have to do."

Tinycloud and Rockshade exchanged a glance. "Right, Cherrytail," Rockshade muttered.

"Mind you," Cherrytail murmured into Poppystar's ear when the two warriors had turned away, "they've got a point. When Leafdapple comes back we should find him some extra tasks. We don't want these kitty warriors getting the idea that they can have an easier time than the full Clan cats."

Poppystar felt her neck fur begin to bristle as her deputy used the insulting term again, but she forced it to lie flat again. This wasn't the time to start an argument.

Cherrytail paused to give his ear a scratch with one hind paw, then added, "If they want to be part of the Clan, they'll have to understand that tasks are shared equally."

"You're right," Poppystar replied. She was grateful for her deputy's support, when she knew that he really agreed with Tinycloud and Rockshade. "Maybe if we get them all involved in organizing the

new dens, they'll feel more like staying in the gorge."

Cherrytail gave her a disbelieving look and twitched one ear. "Yeah, maybe."

Poppystar decided there was nothing to be gained by discussing the problem anymore. Instead, she waved her tail to beckoning Rockshade and Bouncefire. "And you, Cobaltclaw," she meowed. "You can come with me instead of Leafdapple."

Cobaltclaw blinked, obviously surprised and pleased to be picked out by his Clan leader, and followed Poppystar out of the den with the two young she-cats. Outside, the snow had almost stopped, only a few stray flakes still drifting down. But the trails were treacherous with snowmelt and the wind still swept across the rocks, nearly strong enough to blow a cat off the cliff.

"Watch where you're putting your paws," Poppystar warned.

She led the way down the trail to the apprentices' den to collect Nettlepaw and Birdpaw, and was pleased to see Snookpaw peering out when she reached the entrance to the cave. *She stayed, too.*

"Come on," she meowed to the apprentices. "We're going to start clearing out the caves farther up the gorge."

"Great!" Birdpaw shot out past Snookpaw and onto the trail, nearly losing his balance when his paws struck a lump of ice. "What do you think we'll find in there?"

"Bird bones and dust," his sister replied, emerging more sedately. "Mouse-brain!"

Birdpaw raised a paw as if he was about to swipe his sister across the ear, then stopped when he saw that Poppystar had her eye on him.

"Let's go," Poppystar meowed, before the apprentices could start tussling. "It's cold, so we can warm ourselves up with some exploration."

Once they reached the bottom of the gorge, she picked up the pace

until the cats were bounding along, muscles stretching and tails streaming out behind them. Their panting breath made white clouds in the cold air. The new caves were a couple of fox-lengths before the training area, now white with a light covering of snow. Looking up, Poppystar spotted four narrow openings, two close to the bottom of the cliff, and two others higher up.

Cobaltclaw approached the nearest gap and stuck his head and shoulders inside. "It's really small," he reported, his disappointment obvious even though his voice was muffled.

"Cobaltclaw, come out," Poppystar ordered.

The black tom backed out of the cave and turned an inquiring look on Poppystar.

"What did you forget?" the Clan leader asked.

Cobaltclaw looked puzzled.

"He should have listened and sniffed first," Rockshade meowed loudly.

Poppystar gave her an annoyed look. *She's right, but I shouldn't have given her the chance to embarrass Cobaltclaw. I need to be more careful.*

"You never know what might be lurking inside," Poppystar explained. "There could be a fox or a badger, or even a bees' nest. So you have to watch out when you're going into a confined space."

"Sorry." Cobaltclaw hung his head and scraped one forepaw on the ground in front of him.

"So why don't you have a look at this other cave and show us how to do it the right way?" Poppystar indicated the second lower cave with a flick of her tail.

Cobaltclaw padded up to the cave and halted a tail-length in front of it, opening his jaws to taste the air. After a few heartbeats he turned to Poppystar. "I can't hear or scent anything. There's nothing alive in there."

"Go and look, then."

Cobaltclaw approached the cave and slid cautiously inside, to reappear a moment later. "It's empty, Poppystar. But I think it's too small to be of much use."

Poppystar took a look in both the lower caves. Cobaltclaw was right. They were too cramped to make comfortable dens; they didn't go back far enough, and the roofs were low. Snail trails crisscrossed the stone floors with silver lines, and farther back leaves and debris were heaped against the walls.

"We'll clean them out later," she decided. "They might do for storage."

Outside, Bouncefire was staring up at the other two caves. "I can climb up there," she announced. "Do you want me to take a look?"

"We'll all take a look," Poppystar replied. "Follow me, and be careful. There's no proper trail leading up there."

The route up to the next cave was a hard scramble. Poppystar had to push herself over boulders and edging along narrow ledges. Glancing back she saw that the other cats were managing to follow; Rockshade grabbed Nettlepaw by the scruff and dragged her up a slanting rock when the short-legged apprentice couldn't reach the next crack.

If we want to use this cave as a den, we'll have to make a better way of getting to it.

But when she reached the entrance to the cave and checked to see if it was safe, Poppystar was encouraged to see that it was much bigger than the two lower ones. Its roof arched at least a tail-length above her head, and she couldn't see the back wall, it was so choked with debris.

Bouncefire scrambled panting onto the ledge beside her, and immediately let out a huge sneeze. "Dust!" she gasped.

"Right," Poppystar mewed, feeling a spark of amusement at the young cat's surprised look. "So let's get on with clearing it out."

She started by clawing at an old bird's nest, which instantly came apart in her paws, sending up another cloud of dust and setting her sneezing, too. She heard a *mrrow* of laughter from Bouncefire as she set to work beside her.

The other cats arrived to help, pulling out twigs and leaves and bones of long-dead prey and sending it all cascading over the lip of the entrance into the gorge below. At last Poppystar began to get a better idea of how big the cave was: a wide space stretching deep into the cliff, dry and shielded from bad weather.

"This could be good," she wheezed as she blinked through a haze of dust. "Plenty of room, and it will be comfortable once we bring some moss up here."

"Safe, too," Cobaltclaw pointed out. "Nothing could sneak up on us."

Poppystar gave him an approving nod. He might spend his nights in a Twoleg nest, but the black tom was smart and thought like a warrior. *Maybe we shouldn't try to make an easier trail. It'll be safer to leave it as it is.*

"Let's take a breather," she mewed, sitting where she could look out of the entrance at the climb they had just managed. "You've all worked really hard."

Her Clanmates flopped down around her and began to groom dust and bits of debris out of their pelts.

"Poppystar, will you tell us more about the old Skyclan?" Snookpaw asked, sounding unusually shy. "I've heard the other cats say there was another Clan here a long time ago. Is it true?"

"Completely," Poppystar answered, trying to recollect everything that Sandstar had told her about the first Skyclan. She settled herself more comfortably on the sandy floor of the cave. "Long ago, the first Skyclan lived in a forest, with four other Clans. But they had to leave when Twolegs stole their territory to build a Twolegplace."

"There are *other* Twolegplaces?" Nettlepaw gasped, her eyes

stretched wide in wonder.

"Oh, yes, lots of others. Anyway, Skyclan traveled for a long way, and at last they came to the gorge and made their camp here. They lived in the dens where we live now."

The three apprentices glanced at one another, their eyes wide, as if they expected to see the spirits of those long ago cats padding in through the cave entrance.

"But then the rats came," Poppystar went on. "They killed many of the old Skyclan cats, and drove out the rest. Some of the warriors went elsewhere, and some of them became loners or kittypets. And some—just a few—hold on to the memory of Skyclan until Sandstar came and brought it back to life."

Birdpaw heaved a long sigh. "That's so great! Do you think that we could be descended from those old Skyclan cats? I wish I was!"

"And me!" Rockshade put in.

"Me too!" Nettlepaw added, while Snookpaw blinked but said nothing.

"You might be," Poppystar mewed, though privately she had her doubts. Sandstar had told her that the old Skyclan cats had long legs for jumping and hard pads for walking on rocky surfaces. Nettlepaw and Birdpaw didn't have either of those, and neither did Rockshade or Bouncefire.

But Snookpaw could be a Skyclan descendant, she thought. *She's good at leaping and fearless when she climbs trees. And Cobaltclaw's legs are long and strong.*

"Every cat around here could have links to the old Clan," she continued, careful not to single out the daylight warriors. "Which means that every cat has the right to be our Clanmate."

"I'm a Skyclan cat!" Rockshade announced, crouching down as if she intended to take a flying leap out of the cave. "I can jump and climb really well."

"So can I!" Nettlepaw chimed in, her eyes gleaming. "And my legs are really strong."

Poppystar suppressed a sigh. *Are they going to start measuring each other's legs now?*

"I'm strong, too. Unlike some I could mention," Rockshade growled.

She means the daylight warriors, Poppystar realized. "Skyclan cats come from many different places," she reminded the young black she-cat. "They should all have a chance to belong here."

"I guess so," Rockshade mumbled, though Poppystar wasn't sure she really agreed.

Cobaltclaw and Snookpaw exchanged a glance, but neither of them spoke.

Inwardly, Poppystar admitted to doubts of her own. *I wish I could be sure how to handle this. I want a Clan where every cat will be welcomed and valued for the skills they can bring. Instead, all my warriors seem to be pulling in different directions.*

When Sandstar and Fireheart left, all the Skyclan cats had lived in the gorge day and night, dedicated warriors like the Clans in the forest where Sandstar lived. He'd had no way of knowing that cats from the Twolegplace would want to join Skyclan on their own terms, spending days in the gorge and nights with their housefolk, well fed and cozy and safe from foxes. None of Sandstar's advice about leading a Clan had prepared Poppystar for having Clanmates who seemed to be split in two.

Can I really hold them together?

Chapter 3

Poppystar opened her eyes to see moonlight slanting in through the entrance to her den. A voice had roused her from sleep, but now all was silent except for the whispering of the river at the bottom of the gorge. She rose to her paws, arched her back in a long stretch, and shook scraps of moss from her pelt. Slipping out of her den, she padded down the trail until she reached the edge of the water.

At the foot of the Rockpile, the three new warriors were keeping vigil, each one sitting upright with their tails curled neatly over their paws. In the moonlight they looked like cats carved out of ice or stone, and they didn't acknowledge the nod Poppystar gave them as she passed.

She headed for the new dens, her paws gliding silently over the white drifts of snow that still lingered in the shade of the rocks. The boulders glistened with frost, as if leaf-bare had returned to the gorge, but the ginger and white leader didn't feel cold. Instead, her body felt warm and curiously light, like a leaf spinning idly in a warm breeze. Scrambling up the rocky cliff face, Poppystar reached the largest of the new dens and padded inside, shaking the snowmelt from each of her paws in turn.

I was right, she thought. *This* will *make a good den. It's sheltered from the wind, and it will be hard for enemies to reach the entrance—if they suspect we're in here at all.*

"Your cats will be safe here."

Poppystar spun around at the sound of a voice behind her. Another cat stood outlined in the entrance to the cave, black against the silver moonlight. Catching her breath; Poppystar drew in a sweet but unfamiliar scent. Not until the strange cat stepped forward did she recognize the graceful tortoiseshell and white figure of Spottedleaf.

The medicine cat who walks with Starclan. Sandstar's friend. What is he

doing here?

Spottedleaf paced forward, his pelt glittering with starlight, until he was close enough to brush against Poppystar's fur. His scent wreathed around them. "Greetings, dear friend," he murmured.

"Am I—am I dreaming?" Poppystar asked hoarsely. She still wasn't used to dead cats walking into her mind and talking to her as if they were still alive.

Spottedleaf dipped his head. "To your Clanmates, you are asleep in your den. Didn't you notice how the new warriors didn't even blink when you walked by?"

Poppystar shrugged. "I thought they were obeying the rules of the first night vigil."

"I don't doubt that they are," Spottedleaf murmured. He looked around, pricking his ears. "Skyclan must be doing well if you need new dens," he observed.

"I... we were just exploring," Poppystar explained. "Wondering what these caves could be used for. We have new kits in the Clan, and more on the way, but we haven't spilled out of our old dens yet."

Spottedleaf's glowing amber eyes searched Poppystar's face. "Is all well with your Clan?"

"Everything's fine," Poppystar replied carefully. She wasn't going to share her concerns about Leafdapple and the others with this cat who was almost a stranger to her. *He isn't part of our Clan.* "How are Sandstar and Fireheart?"

"They're both well," the Starclan cat replied. "They have two kits—little daughters."

"That's great!" Warm pleasure flooded through Poppystar. "When you see Sandstar, tell him how happy I am for them."

"I will." To Poppystar's surprise, Spottedleaf didn't seem as pleased as she would have expected at the thought of Sandstar's litter. Once again, he fixed his amber gaze on Poppystar. "You have the hardest

task of any Clan leader," he meowed. "You must build a Clan from cats who know nothing of the warrior code."

Poppystar hadn't expected Spottedleaf to begin discussing her Clan, and she wasn't sure she welcomed it. *We* do *know the warrior code. Sandstar taught the first of us, and we're teaching the rest!*

"I do my best," she pointed out.

"And you are doing well," Spottedleaf told her. "But there is a long way to go before your future is secure."

Poppystar stiffened. What did Spottedleaf know that he wasn't sharing? Had he seen the tension among the Skyclan warriors earlier? She opened her mouth to defend her Clanmates, but Spottedleaf was beckoning her to the cave entrance with a wave of his tail.

Looking out, Poppystar saw several unfamiliar cats in the bottom of the gorge. At first her fur started to bristle at the idea of strangers invading the camp. Then she realized that pale starlight glimmered from the fur of the newcomers, and their bodies were so faint that they were almost transparent; Poppystar could make out the jagged shapes of rocks behind them through their shadowy forms. As she watched, some of the cats padded away in different directions. Three more melted into the shadows of the elders' den, leaving only two behind, sitting together at the entrance of Echosong's cave.

"Who are they?" Poppystar whispered, icy claws pricking her spine.

Spottedleaf didn't reply. Instead, the voice of the bigger cat, a dark brown tabby she-cat, floated faintly up from the gorge. "Will a Clan ever live here again?"

The other cat, a paler brown she-cat, dipped her head and murmured something Poppystar couldn't catch. She sensed great sadness clinging to the pelts of both cats, like the scent of rank herbs.

Then the smaller cat raised her head, gazing upward as if she spoke directly to Poppystar. "This is the leaf-bare of my Clan." Now her

words rang clearly in Poppystar's ears, echoing through the seasons that separated her from the long-ago cat. "Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive."

"Is that a warning?" Poppystar whispered over her shoulder, trying hard to keep her voice steady. "Maybe a prophecy?" She remembered her dream of the night before, the uprooted trees and bushes hurled down the gorge by the foaming torrent where her cats were drowning. *Was that dream a prophecy, too?*

No answer came from Spottedleaf, and when Poppystar turned toward him, the cave was empty. Shivering as if she had fallen into icy water, Poppystar looked out at the gorge again. The moon shone down on empty rocks; the shadowy cats had vanished.

A heartbeat later, Poppystar opened her eyes to find herself curled up in the mossy nest inside her own den. Watery dawn light seeped in through the entrance. She blinked in confusion, the words of the small brown she-cat still echoing in her ears.

What did she mean by "greater storms"? And how can cats have "deeper roots"?

"Mouse-brain! There'll be more prey if we go downstream!"

"No, we should cross the stream and hunt in the forest."

"You're both wrong! We should climb the cliff and try the trees at the top. There are plenty of squirrels there."

Poppystar sighed as the bickering reached her den; she recognized the voices of Sparrowpelt, Rockshade, and Bouncefire. Heaving herself to her paws, she stumbled to the entrance of her den, struggling to tear her mind away from the clinging cobwebs of her dream. When she peered out the entrance, Poppystar spotted the Clan's three newest warriors crouched together at the bottom of the Rockpile.

Bouncefire's voice rose in a wail. "If you would just *listen*..."

Poppystar headed down the trail to break up the argument, but before she reached them Cherrytail appeared, bounding down the rocks from the direction of the warriors' den. Poppystar halted on a boulder at the foot of the cliff and watched her deputy deal with the quarrel.

"What's going on here?" His voice was as rough as a pawful of claws scraping across rock. "You're supposed to be keeping vigil, not waking the rest of the camp with your caterwauling."

"It's dawn. Our vigil's over," Rockshade pointed out.

"And we want to go hunting," Sparrowpelt added.

Cherrytail raked all three of them with an icy glare from eyes like chips of green ice. "Funny, I always thought it was the Clan deputy who set the patrols. Am I wrong?"

The young cats hung their heads. "No, Cherrytail," Bouncefire muttered.

"Good." The Clan deputy flicked his tail. "Rockshade, you can come with me and do the border patrol on this side of the gorge. Bouncefire, Clovertail is leading a hunting patrol; go find him and tell him I said you're to go with him."

"What about me?" Sparrowpelt asked.

"Sharpclaw is leading the other border patrol. You can go with her. And make sure that I don't have to talk to you about this kind of squabbling again."

Poppystar gave her deputy a nod of approval as he spun around and stalked away. Pleased that she hadn't needed to intervene, she headed along the bottom of the cliff toward the medicine cat's den.

From behind her, she overheard Sparrowpelt's voice. "At least I can stay away from Echosong's den today. If he catches me, he'll have me fetching herbs again."

Poppystar almost turned back and ordered the dark brown tabby she-cat to do just that, but she didn't want to countermand

Cherrytail's orders. *I'll make sure she helps Echosong again soon, though,* she decided. *Every cat has to understand how important the medicine cat is to the life of the Clan.*

When Poppystar slipped through the outer cave into Echosong's inner den, the young medicine cat had his back to her as he bent over the herbs that were stored in cracks at the back.

"Juniper berries, yarrow, tansy..." he murmured to himself. "No, that's not tansy, it's coltsfoot..."

"Greetings, Echosong."

At the sound of his leader's voice the silver tabby jumped and whipped around, his green eyes wide. When he saw Poppystar he relaxed, puffing out a breath. "Poppystar, you startled me!"

"Sorry." Poppystar padded forward to touch noses with the medicine cat, enjoying the sweet, crisp scent of herbs that clung to his fur.

"I'm glad you're here," Echosong went on. "I—I had something that might have been a dream last night. At least, I know it was a dream, but I'm not sure if it was important."

Poppystar felt a tingle beneath her pelt. She'd intended to ask the medicine cat about her dream, too: s coincidence, or something more? "Tell me what happened," she prompted.

Echosong paced across the outer den and sat down in the entrance, beckoning with his tail for his Clan leader to sit beside him. "I woke up—or at least I thought I woke up—and I heard quiet voices outside my den. When I looked out, I saw two cats. One was a big dark tabby, and the other was smaller and paler brown. Starlight was glimmering in their fur, but they looked so faint and far away."

Poppystar's belly clenched. Echosong was describing the two cats she had seen in her own dream. "Did they say anything?" she asked warily.

Echosong nodded. "The big tabby said, 'It is time to leave. Our last duty is completed.' They started to pad away, up the gorge. Then the smaller cat stopped and turned, and I felt as if she was looking

straight at me. She said, 'This is the leaf-bare of my Clan. Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive.' What do you think she meant, Poppystar?"

Poppystar's heart was thumping as if it were about to burst out of her chest. It was a moment before she could reply. "I don't know. But it must mean something. Because I had the same dream last night."

Echosong sprang to his paws. "The exact dream?"

"Near enough. Except I dreamed that I went to the new dens up the gorge, and that's where I saw the two cats. Spottedleaf was there, too."

Briefly Echosong looked envious. "I wish I'd seen him. There's so much I need to ask him about herbs."

"Maybe Fawnstep will visit you tonight for another training session. After all, he was a Skyclan medicine cat," Poppystar suggested. She was still a little suspicious of Spottedleaf's appearance in her dreams. Surely Spottedleaf's loyalties were to Thunderclan? *Why is he so interested in my Clan?* Poppystar flicked her tail-tip, trying to control her frustration. "But right now, we need to figure out what those cats in the gorge were talking about. It... it sounded like a prophecy, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did," Echosong agreed quietly.

"The small tabby was warning us," Poppystar murmured, anxiety prickling in her fur as if ants were running through it. "She talked about worse things to come for Skyclan."

The young medicine cat shuddered. "What could be worse than the rats?"

"And 'deeper roots,'" Poppystar went on. "Whatever that means."

"Maybe we should eat roots?" Echosong guessed.

Poppystar shook her head. "What good would that do? Unless

they're a source of medicine that we haven't discovered yet... Besides, I had another dream the night before. Flood water was pouring down the gorge, uprooting everything in its path, flooding into our dens and sweeping us away. I think the two dreams are connected."

Echosong nodded thoughtfully. "One of our Clanmates might have a better idea about what the dreams meant," he suggested. "Should we call a meeting and tell them?"

Something inside Poppystar flinched away from the thought of confessing to the rest of the Clan that the leader and the medicine cat couldn't figure out what their ancestors were trying to tell them. Was Sandstar plagued by these kinds of doubts? Maybe she should give Starclan another chance to explain.

"No, we won't say anything to the rest of the Clan yet," she meowed. Echosong looked surprised. Poppystar added, "Not because they're not involved, but because we might get more dreams that make the prophecy clearer. After all, what could we tell them now? That something bad is going to happen? That will only make them panic."

Echosong tilted his head to one side. "If that's what you want, Poppystar," he murmured.

Poppystar tried not to bristle at the hint of doubt in the medicine cat's tone. "It's what is best for the Clan," she insisted. "And if we have any more visions, we'll discuss them in private until we can figure out what our ancestors are trying to tell us."

Chapter 4

Poppystar padded up the gorge toward the new caves, enjoying the sensation of sunlight on her fur. A few days had passed since the snowfall, and the weather had turned unexpectedly warm so early in newleaf.

As she approached the new dens, a twig sailed out into the air from the cliff face and clattered onto the ground by Poppystar's paws; she had to jump aside to avoid it.

"It's a snake!" a voice yowled from above her head. "I killed it!"

Gazing upward, Poppystar spotted two of the daylight warriors, Harleymoon and Amber, on a ledge outside the fourth of the new caves, which so far no cat had cleared out. As she watched, Amber scooped up a pawful of dry moss and threw it at Harleymoon; it hit the white she-cat in the chest and spattered all over her fur.

"I'll get you for that!" Harleymoon meowed, leaping on top of Amber.

For Starclan's sake! Poppystar thought, annoyed, as she began to scramble up to the ledge. *Waspwhisker's kits have more sense!*

The she-cats sprang apart as Poppystar bounded up the last couple of tail-lengths and joined them on the ledge.

"What d'you think you're doing?" she growled. "I thought you were here to help, not behave like a couple of kits."

Before either of them could reply, Cherrytail emerged from the cave. His tortoiseshell and white pelt was clumped and streaked with dust and his green eyes sparked with irritation. "I've had to put up with this all morning," he told Poppystar, turning a furious glare on Harleymoon and Amber. "You're being disloyal to your Clan when you behave so stupidly. Don't you care about the honor of being a warrior? You haven't done a stroke of work, and you're

making it harder for every other cat."

"It's not like we'll have to sleep in these caves," Harleymoon pointed out. "So why should we have to clear them out?"

Cherrytail let out a long hiss of anger, and even Amber's eyes widened in shock. Harleymoon glanced uneasily from one to the other; Poppystar could tell that she hadn't realized how insolent the words sounded until they were out of her mouth.

Cobaltclaw and his apprentice, Frecklepaw, had appeared at the mouth of the cave, peering around Cherrytail, and Poppystar spotted Rockshade and Tinycloud in the shadows behind them. She realized that every cat was waiting for her to do something; behavior like this couldn't be ignored. The fact that it was warriors from Twolegplace causing the trouble somehow made it much worse.

"Clan cats don't fool around when their Clanmates are working," she told Amber and Harleymoon. "And they certainly don't talk like that to the Clan deputy—or any other cat. Warriors treat one another with respect." She felt as if a stone were lodged in her belly as she added, "It's not as if this is the first time. You couldn't be bothered to turn up for the warrior ceremony, and on your last two hunting patrols you never caught a thing." She took a deep breath and went on, "You're both banished from the camp until the next full moon. Perhaps by then you'll have decided whether you really want to be part of Skyclan."

Amber and Harleymoon crouched down as their leader scolded them, their ears flattened. As she pronounced their sentence they exchanged a shocked glance.

"We're sorry, Poppystar," Amber meowed. "We didn't think. Please let us stay."

"We'll work really hard," Harleymoon promised. "Cherrytail, I'm sorry I said what I did. I didn't mean it."

"'Sorry' catches no prey," Poppystar responded. "It's too late for that."

"But I promised to join Fallowfern and Nettlepaw on a hunting patrol after sunhigh," the white she-cat protested.

"And I was going to help Birdpaw check the elders for fleas," Amber put in. "Tangle is halfway through telling us a story about a fox, and I really want to hear the end."

"You should have thought of that sooner," Poppystar meowed. She couldn't weaken now, not with Cherrytail's stare scorching the fur on her back. "We'll welcome you back at the next full moon, if you are ready to behave like proper warriors while you're here. But now you have to go."

Harleymoon opened her jaws to argue again, then seemed to think better of it. Despondently the two cats scrambled down the cliff face to the bottom of the gorge and headed toward the Rockpile with their heads bowed and their tails drooping.

Watching them, with Cherrytail bristling at her side, Poppystar wondered if she was doing the right thing by allowing kittypets into her Clan at all. Could this be the "greater storm" that the dream cat had warned about? Poppystar shoved the thought away; a couple of flea-brained she-cats didn't deserve a prophecy all to themselves.

But I can't go on ignoring Cherrytail's doubts about the daylight warriors. I have to stand up for my deputy.

Before Harleymoon and Amber had gone more than a couple of tail-lengths, they met Sharpclaw and Buoncefire bounding around a spur of rock on their way to the new caves. In the still air, their voices floated clearly up to Poppystar.

"What's the matter with you two?" Sharpclaw asked, halting in front of the dejected she-cats. "You two look as if you've lost a squirrel and found a beetle."

"It's worse than that," Harleymoon muttered.

"What, then?" Bouncefire demanded.

"We were fooling around," Amber admitted; she sounded genuinely ashamed. "And then this flea-brain"—she gave Harleymoon a shove

—"was really rude to Cherrytail. So Poppystar has banished us from camp until the next full moon."

"That's terrible!" Bouncefire squeaked, wide-eyed.

"It sounds as if you asked for it," Sharpclaw meowed tartly. "You must have bees in your brain if you think you can come here and just fool around."

"Sharpclaw's right." Poppystar jumped as Cobaltclaw spoke quietly behind her from the mouth of the cave. "It was all their fault. Don't feel bad about it, Poppystar."

"That's right," Frecklepaw added; he was a leggy light brown tabby, and he looked scared stiff at speaking directly to his Clan leader.

Poppystar touched his shoulder gently with her tail-tip. "Thank you, Frecklepaw."

More cats pushed their way out onto the ledge to watch the two daylight warriors leave. Leafdapple and Snookpaw joined Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw, with Sparrowpelt just behind, while Shrewtooth crept out last of all. Poppystar blinked in surprise; she hadn't realized how big this cave was.

"It's a pity they couldn't stay," Sparrowpelt mewed sadly. "There won't be as many of us to fill the fresh-kill pile."

Leafdapple and Snookpaw glanced at each other, murmuring agreement.

"And there won't be as many mouths to feed," Rockshade pointed out, swiping her sister over the ear with one paw. "Besides, how much prey did those two ever bring in?"

"What about enemies?" Shrewtooth crouched at the front of the ledge and peered along the gorge. "Will there be enough of us to fight them off?"

Rockshade rolled her eyes. "What enemies, mouse-brain? There's only us."

Poppystar's heart grew heavier as she heard her Clanmates arguing. *Will this Clan ever learn to work together?*

"Thanks for supporting me," Cherrytail broke in on her thoughts. "It was the right decision."

"I didn't do it for your sake!" Poppystar snapped, surprising herself with her sharp tone. "This problem isn't over yet."

Cherrytail looked surprised, too, his green eyes flashing at her, but he said nothing. Poppystar wondered if she should apologize, but she couldn't think of the right thing to say.

Apologizing is all I do these days, when I'm not being baffled by something going on in the Clan.

Giving her deputy a brusque nod, she headed down into the gorge. At the foot of the cliff she met Sharpclaw and Bouncefire; Harleymoon and Amber had disappeared.

"We're looking for Leafdapple and Snookpaw," Bouncefire meowed. "We're supposed to be doing a border patrol."

"They're up in the caves," Poppystar told them.

"Great! Er... Poppystar," Sharpclaw went on, "we spoke to Harleymoon and Amber. Do you still want us to patrol the border, or should we hunt instead?"

Poppystar remembered the few miserable pieces of prey that had remained on the fresh-kill pile when she passed it on her way up the gorge.

"You'd better hunt," she decided. *Border patrols can wait. Right now, it feels as if all Skyclan's problems are inside its borders, not outside.*

Leaving Sharpclaw yowling for Leafdapple and Snookpaw at the bottom of the cliff, Poppystar headed for the elders' den. Just as she reached the end of the trail that led up the cliff face, she met Birdpaw.

"Can you go to help Cherrytail with the new caves?" she mewed. "Some of his cats are going hunting, and there's still a lot of work to do."

Birdpaw blinked in disappointment. "Sure, Poppystar. But I was just going to check the elders for fleas."

"You *want* to check the elders for fleas?" Poppystar mewed.

Birdpaw gave his chest fur a couple of awkward licks. "Well, Tangle was telling this really great story..."

Poppystar let out a soft purr of amusement and gently flicked the apprentice's ear with her tail. "There'll be plenty of chances to listen to Tangle," she promised. "Now you need to go and help Cherrytail."

"Okay." Birdpaw dipped his head and bounded along the gorge toward the new caves.

Poppystar watched him go, then padded up the trail that led to the elders' den. "Greetings, Lichenfur, Tangle," she meowed as she poked her head inside.

"Where's that pesky apprentice?" Tangle growled without returning her greeting. "He was supposed to be sorting out my fleas." The old cat vigorously scratched her rumpled tabby pelt. "They're driving me mad."

"I'll do your fleas, Tangle," Poppystar offered, slipping right inside the den. "Birdpaw is busy."

Lichenfur raised his head from the nest of moss where he was curled up. His amber eyes were wide with shock. "Do other Clan leaders search their elders' pelts for fleas? I didn't know that."

The barb in his voice was unmistakable, like a thorn hidden in a bed of moss. Poppystar guessed the old cat thought he was inviting criticism by taking on tasks that were beneath her rank. She bit back a sharp reply.

"I wouldn't ask any of my cats to do something I'm not prepared to do myself," she responded mildly. "And I have no idea what other

Clan leaders do. But if you want to lie here with fleas in your pelts, I can go away and leave you in peace."

"I suppose it's all right," Lichenfur admitted grudgingly.

Tangle just grunted; Poppystar assumed that was agreement. *I bet elders are the same wherever they are.*

"What's this I hear about you sending those kittypets away?" Lichenfur asked as Poppystar settled down beside Tangle and started to probe deep into her ragged fur.

Poppystar blinked, surprised even though she knew how fast gossip traveled within the Clan. "How do you know about that?"

"Rainfur met Harleymoon and Amber on their way out," Tangle explained. "And she came to tell us."

And the whole Clan will know about it by now, Poppystar thought, pouncing on a flea and cracking it between her teeth.

"I'm not sure I did the right thing," she admitted. "There seem to be so many arguments at the moment, and I'm afraid I've just added to them."

Tangle twisted her neck to look up at her with bleary amber eyes; Poppystar thought she could make out a trace of wisdom lurking in their depths. "Whatever you decide," she rumbled, "you have to be strong. The path Skyclan walks is shadowed, and you're the one leading us along it."

Lichenfur snorted. "Cats are supposed to be able to see in the dark, and I for one don't want a blind leader."

Poppystar tensed at the hostility in the elder's tone.

Tangle gave her a nudge. "Ignore him," she whispered. "He sat on a thistle all night."

Poppystar nodded, warmed by the grumpy old cat's support. *But how many more of my Clanmates think that I'm a blind leader?* she wondered.

Leaving the elders, she turned her paws in the direction of Echosong's den. It would be a relief to discuss Harelymoon and Amber with the young medicine cat and ask his advice. She hadn't gone more than a couple of paw steps, when she heard a scrabbling sound from above; grit and scraps of debris pattered down onto the trail. The shriek of a terrified cat echoed through the gorge.

Looking up, Poppystar saw Birdpaw dangling from the cliff face above the highest of the new caves, clinging to the rock by the tips of his claws.

"Help!" he screeched. "Help me!"

Chapter 5

Before Poppystar could move, Cherrytail shot out of one of the lower caves and began clawing his way upward, closely followed by Clovertail. In the same heartbeat, Rainfur emerged from the nursery and flung herself across the rock face toward the terrified apprentice, scrambling precariously along a trail that was so narrow it was almost invisible against the sandy cliff.

Poppystar began to climb, too, her paws pounding over the rocks, but she was much farther away than her deputy.

"Hold on!" Cherrytail ordered, his voice crisp and calm. "Don't move!"

Rainfur let out a panic-stricken wail. "Starclan help him!"

The rock was crumbling beneath Birdpaw's claws. Poppystar's belly lurched as she saw him slide a tail-length down the cliff. She spotted Cobaltclaw and Rockshade peering out of the cave below, but Birdpaw was just out of reach of their paws.

"I'm slipping!" he gasped. "I can't hold on!"

"Yes, you can. Keep still." Cherrytail was only a couple of fox-lengths below the apprentice now, the only cat close enough to have a hope of reaching him. His powerful hind legs pushed upward from a crack in the rock and he lunged toward Birdpaw, but before he could fasten his claws into the young cat's fur, more of the rock flaked away under Birdpaw's paws.

The apprentice let out a shriek; his paws flailed as he tried to dig his claws into the powdery surface. Poppystar gazed in horror as his small body plummeted down. Off balance, Cherrytail barely saved himself from following.

Birdpaw's shriek was cut off as he struck a jutting boulder, bounced off, and fell the rest of the way to the foot of the cliff, landing with

an ugly thud. He lay motionless on the trail between the cliff and the river.

With a cold weight gathering in her belly, Poppystar turned and scrambled down to join him. Landing lightly beside him, she bent her head to sniff his black fur.

"Is he dead?" Rainfur hurtled down the cliff and flung herself onto the ground beside her son. Every hair on her pelt bristled with horror. "Starclan, don't let him be dead!"

Birdpaw lay stretched out in the fust at the bottom of the cliff. His eyes were closed, but relief flooded through Poppystar when she saw his flank twitch.

"He's not dead," she murmured, pressing her muzzle against Rainfur's shoulder.

Clovertail jumped down and shot one horrified look at the motionless apprentice. "I'll fetch Echosong," he meowed, and raced away.

Rainfur crouched beside Birdpaw and started to lick the fur on the top of his head. "Wake up, Birdpaw," she pleaded, her voice quivering. 'It's my fault," she added, raising wide blue eyes to her Clan leader. "I should have been watching him."

Poppystar could understand the light gray she-cat's guilt. Birdpaw was Rainfur's son and her apprentice; no wonder she felt responsible for his accident.

I remember Sandstar telling us that forest cats don't mentor their own kin. Maybe they have a point.

"It's not your fault," she reassured Rainfur, resting her tail-tip on the distraught cat's shoulder. "He's an apprentice, not a kit. You can't have your eye on him all the time."

Rainfur didn't respond, just went on covering the young cat's head with frantic licks.

Poppystar glanced over her shoulder at the sound of soft thuds

behind her, and saw Cherrytail, Tinycloud, and Shrewtooth heading toward her. Rockshade, Sparrowpelt, and Cobaltclaw leaped down just behind them. They crowded around and gazed down at the motionless apprentice.

"I'm sorry." Cherrytail lashed his tail, clearly angry with himself. "If I'd been just a bit quicker..."

"You did your best," Poppystar told him. "No cat can—"

"He's dead!" Shrewtooth let out a loud wail, her neck fur bristling out. "Birdpaw's dead!"

Rainfur gasped, her blue eyes stretching wide with horror.

"No, he's not," Poppystar snapped. "And he's not going to die. Shrewtooth, instead of terrifying every cat, go find some moss and wet it in the river."

Shrewtooth stared at her; she opened her mouth to let out another wail, then shut it with a snap. "Sorry," she muttered, scuffling at the ground with his forepaws. "I—I guess I'll go and do that, then."

She dashed off. Poppystar bent closer over Birdpaw's body, encouraged to see that his breathing seemed to be more steady. She saw that one of his legs was stretched out at an awkward angle. *Something's wrong there. Please, Starclan, don't let it be broken!*

To her relief, she heard the quick pattering of paw steps approaching from farther down the gorge and Echosong appeared at her side, with Clovertail just behind.

"Keep back, all of you," the medicine cat mewed briskly. "Rainfur, you can stay, as long as you keep him calm and not make him more scared."

Rainfur gulped and sat upright, forcing the fur on her neck and shoulders to lie flat. Poppystar was impressed by her self-control, but the bleak look in her blue eyes showed how much she was suffering.

"Echosong, please save my son," she begged.

Pity for the light gray she-cat stabbed through Poppystar like a thorn. Rainfur had already lost her mate, Petalnose, in the battle against the rats. *Starclan, you couldn't be this cruel enough to take her son, too!*

For a few heartbeats Echosong studied Birdpaw, running his paw lightly over his fur. He stirred under his touch and tried to raise his head.

"Petalnose?" he whispered.

"No, it's me, little one," Rainfur purred, bending her head to lick his ears.

"That's good." Birdpaw's voice was muzzy. "I thought I was in Starclan." He scrabbled at the ground in an effort to sit up, then sank back with a sharp yowl of pain.

Keep still," Echosong told him, resting a paw on his shoulder. "You've hurt your leg, and I need to look at it properly before I can fix it."

His voice was steady, but Poppystar wondered how confident he really was. The Clan had been lucky to get through leaf-bare without any bad accidents, and Echosong had never needed to treat an injured leg before.

"Sparrowpelt," Echosong meowed, glancing over his shoulder to where the other cats had withdrawn into a worried huddle. "Go and fetch me some poppy seeds."

Sparrowpelt nodded, her eyes wide, and trotted off.

"Rockshade." Echosong beckoned with his tail. "Come here and lie down in the same position as Birdpaw."

Looking mystified, the young she-cat did as he told her, settling herself in the dust beside the injured apprentice. Echosong ran his paws over Rockshade's outstretched leg, then did the same to Birdpaw's. He felt Rockshade's leg again, pushing it in each direction with one paw resting at the top where it joined her flank. He touched Birdpaw's leg at the same place, and the apprentice let

out a squeak of pain.

"I think I understand," he meowed, nodding. "Thank you, Rockshade, you can get up now. Birdpaw's leg isn't broken," he went on, "but it has come out of place. I need to put it back."

"Can you do that?" Rainfur whispered.

"Yes." Echosong sounded tense but brave. "But it will hurt. I'm sorry, Birdpaw."

"I'll be okay," Birdpaw mewed. He blinked gratefully as Shrewtooth returned with a mouthful of dripping moss and set it down beside him. "Thanks, Shrewtooth."

While the apprentice was lapping the moss, Tinycloud padded up with a stick in his jaws and dropped it next to Birdpaw. "Bite down on that," he advised. "It'll help when the pain comes."

Birdpaw nodded. "Can we do it now, please?" he asked Echosong, unable to hide the fear in his voice. He gripped the stick in his jaws and held it tightly.

Echosong motioned with his tail for the other cats to stand out of the way. Poppystar stepped back with them; only Rainfur stayed closed, crouched beside her son with their pelts brushing.

The medicine cat bent over Birdpaw. "I'm sorry, I'm going to have to use my teeth," he meowed. He planted his forepaws firmly on the young cat's haunches, and gripped his leg in his jaws. Then he gave a massive wrench; Poppystar heard the click as Birdpaw's leg went back into place.

The stick splintered in Birdpaw's teeth. Dropping the fragments, he let out a shriek. Rainfur gasped as she bent over him and pushed her nose into his fur.

Then Birdpaw raised his head. "Hey, it doesn't hurt so much!"

Echosong's eyes glowed with a mixture of relief and triumph, while his Clanmates murmured their congratulations. Poppystar could see how impressed they were. Rainfur didn't say anything, but her purrs

almost drowned out the voices of the other cats.

"Well done," Poppystar meowed. "I'm proud of you, Echosong."

Echosong dipped his head, giving his chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. Then he turned and spotted Sparrowpelt, who was hovering close by with a poppy seed head in her jaws. He beckoned the dark brown tabby warrior over with a flick of his ears and took the seed head from her. Carefully he shook out two seeds in front of Birdpaw.

"Lick those up," he instructed. "You'll need to come back to my den and rest, where I can keep an eye on you. The poppy seeds will dull the pain and help you sleep."

"Thanks, Echosong." Birdpaw swallowed the seeds with one lap of his tongue, then tried to struggle to his paws.

"Don't you dare try to walk!" Rainfur meowed. "I'll carry you."

"I'm not a kit!" Birdpaw protested.

"You'll always be my kit, little one." Gently Rainfur picked up Birdpaw by his scruff and began to carry him toward Echosong's den, staggering slightly under his weight but careful not to let his injured leg knock against the ground. Echosong padded alongside.

Poppystar watched them go.

"We're lucky to have Echosong," Cherrytail remarked with satisfaction.

"We certainly are," Tinycloud meowed. "Thank Starclan!"

Poppystar murmured agreement. "But what I'd like to know," she went on, "is what Birdpaw was doing, climbing so high up the cliff. He was well away from any of the trails."

Cherrytail shook his head. "I have no idea."

Poppystar glanced around the rest of her Clanmates, and spotted Clovertail scrabbling uncomfortably at the ground with his

forepaws. "Clovertail?" she prompted.

"I—I'm sorry, Poppystar," the light brown tom stammered. "I think it might have been my fault."

A growl began deep in Cherrytail's throat, but Poppystar motioned him to silence with a wave of her tail. "Explain," she meowed.

"Well... I think Birdpaw was trying to prove he was descended from the old Skyclan cats. He was trying to show how good he was at jumping and climbing."

"And why is that your fault?" Cherrytail asked tartly.

"I—I teased him about it," Clovertail confessed, his eyes full of guilt. "I said he wasn't a real Skyclan cat. But I never thought he would do something like that, Poppystar, honestly I didn't!"

"I believe you," Poppystar told him. "No cat would expect him to do anything so stupid."

But while she reassured Clovertail, anxiety rose inside her like floodwater. This wasn't the first time she had noticed how much her Clanmates cared about their ancestry. The day after the snowfall, she had heard Sharpclaw boasting to Echosong about her strong legs and tough pads. *No cat should care so much about being descended from the ancient Skyclan cats. Maybe they all are, but there's no way of telling. It shouldn't matter to any of them.*

"I'm really sorry," Clovertail went on, blinking in relief that his Clan leader wasn't angry with him. "I'll never do it again."

"Make sure you don't," Poppystar replied, nodding to dismiss him.

She watched him set off up the cliff again, back toward the cave where he had been working, while Cherrytail chivvied the other cats back to their duties. *I need to make them understand that we're all one Clan. The ancestors that matter are those in Starclan, who watch over us as if we were all their kits.*

The hunting patrols were returning, adding their prey to the fresh-kill pile. Poppystar watched Sparrowpelt bound up to Nettlepaw as

she returned with Sharpclaw's patrol.

"Nettlepaw, Birdpaw has had an accident!"

Nettlepaw let her prey fall and stood with her jaws open in horror as Sparrowpelt described how Nettlepaw's littermate had fallen from the cliff.

"But he's going to be fine," the dark brown tabby she-cat finished. "Echosong was great. He put his leg back in the right place, and now he's resting in his den."

"Then he'll need to keep his strength up," Nettlepaw declared, grabbing the biggest squirrel off the fresh-kill pile and hauling it in the direction of Echosong's den.

Poppystar waited until all the cats had gathered around the fresh-kill pile and chosen something to eat. They huddled in small groups; those who had witnessed Nettlepaw's accident were passing on the news to those who had been out of the camp.

As the talk died down, Poppystar leaped up onto the Rockpile and raised her voice in a yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting."

Most of the cats were already there, crouching near the fresh-kill pile or on the bank of the stream. Waspwhisker's kits scrambled out of the nursery with their mother behind them, trying to make sure they didn't fall off the trail as they bounded downward.

"Remember what happened to Birdpaw!" Waspwhisker warned, but the kits didn't pay any attention, plopping down happily onto the path by the waterside and lining up in a row with ears pricked and eyes shining with curiosity. Waspwhisker sat down beside them, stretching out her tail around them.

Poppystar looked around to see if any cat was keeping watch; it was easy to feel trapped and vulnerable when every cat was at the bottom of the gorge, and a few moons ago she had ordered that some cat should always guard the camp during meetings. She nodded in approval when she spotted Fallowfern bounding away to

take up a position on a boulder halfway up the trail.

Lichenfur and Tangle emerged from their den and padded slowly toward the Rockpile, settling down on a flat, sun-warmed stone that jutted out over the water. Nettlepaw appeared from Echosong's den to join her Clanmates, while Echosong and Rainfur sat in the den entrance where they could listen and still keep an eye on Birdpaw.

"Cats of Skyclan," Poppystar began when they were all assembled. "First of all, there's no need to worry about Birdpaw. He's going to be fine, thanks to Echosong."

"Echosong! Echosong!" the Clan yowled; several of the cats jumped to their paws and waved their tails.

The young medicine cat dipped his head in embarrassment at the sound of his Clanmates' enthusiastic praise.

Poppystar raised her for silence. "There's something else I need to say to you," she went on. *Starclan, give me the right words,* she prayed. "This is our Clan, and we should all be proud of it, and proud to belong here. This is our home now. We protect the borders, we hunt the prey, and we train new warriors. If there are echoes of the old Skyclan among us, such as the ability to jump and climb well, they are no more important than what each cat brings to the new Clan."

Clovertail was looking uncomfortable again, his gaze fixed on his paws; one or two of the others seemed uneasy as well. Poppystar sank her claws into the boulder underneath her. *I was right. It's time to root out this obsession with Skyclan blood.*

"I look down at all of you," she continued, "and I see cats who have done everything they can to make our Clan strong. Patchfoot has raised healthy kits who are now Skyclan warriors. Shrewtooth, your sharp hearing means that enemies will never sneak up on us."

The black she-cat started with surprise that her leader had singled her out for praise, and Tinycloud, sitting beside her, gave her a friendly shove.

"Cherrytail is the best deputy a Clan leader could wish for, and Echosong is a truly gifted medicine cat." Poppystar paused and let her gaze sweep across the assembled Clan. "But there is no need for me to go on naming names. I am proud to have *all* of you as my Clanmates, and Skyclan would be diminished without a single one of you."

The cats below her glanced at one another; she saw Lichenfur lean over and mutter something into Tangle's ear.

"But Sandstar chose me and Sharpclaw first," Tinycloud pointed out, "because we inherited our climbing and jumping skills from old Skyclan."

"That's right!" Sharpclaw agreed, nodding.

"No, he didn't!" Waspwhisker argued, her neck fur beginning to bristle. "From what I heard, he chose you because you were nearest. You have no more right to be part of the Clan than my kits."

Sharpclaw sprang to her paws, only to sink down again when Poppystar raised her tail in warning.

"What Waspwhisker said is exactly what I mean," she went on, struggling to keep her voice even. "No cat has more claim to Skyclan than any other, no matter who their ancestors were. As Clan cats, Starclan is here for all of us."

"Poppystar is right." Cherrytail rose to his paws to address the rest of the Clan. "A place in the Clan is earned by loyalty, duty, and courage."

Poppystar had no time to feel warmed by her deputy's support before she saw him cast a dark glance at Leafdapple, Cobaltclaw, and the two daylight warrior apprentices.

Before she could say anything else, she was interrupted by a yowl from Fallowfern. "Intruders!"

The pale brown tom, still on watch halfway up the cliff, had sprung to his paws and was gazing across the gorge to the cliff on the other side. The rest of the Clan spun around, their neck fur bristling, and

stared at the top of the rocks. Poppystar spotted a cat peering over the cliff, only its gray-furred head visible. Within a heartbeat it was joined by another, then a third and a fourth.

A low growl came from Cherrytail's throat. "How did they get so far inside the borders without us noticing?"

"We should have been on border patrol," Bouncefire explained helpfully, "but Poppystar told us to hunt instead."

Poppystar winced at the querying look Cherrytail shot at her. What the young warrior said was true, but when so few strange cats ever came into the territory, she had thought it was more important to stock the fresh-kill pile.

This would *happen the one time there's no patrol!*

Resentment stirred inside Poppystar at the thought of defending herself to her deputy, so she didn't respond to what Bouncefire said. "Clovertail," she meowed instead, "fetch the strangers down here. Sharpclaw and Tinycloud, go with him."

The three cats ran a short way down the gorge and crossed the river by a line of stepping stones. Clovertail led the way back up the gorge and they vanished around a bend in the cliff. The four cats heads vanished, too, pulling back from the edge.

"You're trespassing on Skyclan territory!" Poppystar heard Clovertail's voice raised in a stern yowl. "Come down and meet our leader!"

The Skyclan cats waited in tense silence, in which the sound of pawsteps running down the cliff could be heard. A heartbeat later the patrol reappeared with Clovertail in the lead, while Sharpclaw and Tinycloud flanked the four intruders. The Skyclan cats escorted the newcomers across the river, all the way to the foot of the Rockpile. The other cats drew back to let them pass. Poppystar's eyes narrowed as she saw her Clanmates' bristling fur and extended claws. *Let's hope we can end this peacefully.*

She jumped down from the Rockpile and confronted the four

strange cats. The tallest of them, a long-legged gray tom with blue eyes and a scraped pelt, let his gaze travel slowly around. To Poppystar's surprise, he didn't look scared at being surrounded by a Clan of hostile cats. Instead, he looked... *satisfied.*

Turning to Poppystar, he gave her a nod. "It looks like Sandstar found you after all," he meowed.

Chapter 6

Poppystar stiffened. "How do you know about Sandstar?" she demanded. "Are you from Thunderclan?"

The gray cat snorted. "No, we're not from any Clan. But we met Sandstar and his mate, Fireheart, when they were on their way to find some cats who needed a new home. Is this it?"

He let his gaze travel around the gorge again, and Poppystar could tell he wasn't impressed. She had to concentrate hard to keep her neck fur lying flat and her voice sounding proud and confident.

"Yes, Sandstar found us and this is our home. I am Poppystar, the leader of Skyclan."

"And what are *your* names?" Cherrytail prompted, coming to stand beside Poppystar.

Poppystar realized that she should have asked that before she offered the strangers any information. But the mention of Sandstar's name had shaken her off balance.

"My name is Haze," the skinny gray tom announced. He clicked his tail toward a brown tabby she-cat with a stump for a tail. "This is Stumpy."

"I'm Cory." A black tom took a step forward and dipped his head politely.

"Cinder." The last cat, a black she-cat, shouldered her way forward. "We come from a Twolegplace farther downstream. We helped Sandstar and Fireheart when they were separated by a flood."

"Why are you here?" Poppystar asked. "Are you looking for Sandstar? He and Fireheart left us long ago."

Haze glanced at his companions; his tail-tip twitched and Poppystar

sensed he was ordering them to leave the talking to him. "We often talk about Sandstar and Fireheart," he replied. "And we've always been interested in learning more about Clans."

Cherrytail's gaze flicked from one cat to the next. "You took quite a risk coming in search of them," he pointed out. "It doesn't sound as if you knew much about Sandstar's plans."

The scrawny gray tom shrugged. "The risk paid off."

Cherrytail exchanged a wary glance with Poppystar. She could tell that he was impressed by the strangers' courage, though he still wasn't inclined to trust them. Poppystar felt uneasy, too, and guessed from the hesitant glances they were sharing that her Clanmates felt the same. Creekkit looked up at her mother, Waspwhisker, and asked in a penetrating whisper, "Who are those cats, and what are they doing here?"

Waspwhisker gently covered the kit's mouth with her tail, but Poppystar knew that the question had to be answered. "Yes, why are you here?" She addressed Haze, since he seemed to be the leader. "You're welcome to visit, of course..."

Stumpy stepped forward; her eyes were gentle and unthreatening. "We believe we could learn a lot from you," she explained. "How to hunt, how to guard our territory—"

"Yeah, we did a brilliant job of that today!" Sharpclaw muttered.

"And how to protect our kin," the brown tabby she-cat finished, untroubled by the interruption.

Poppystar was flattered by the respect in Stumpy's tone. "We're only just starting out ourselves," she admitted. "We still have a lot to learn, too. We—"

"We'd be glad to teach you what you want to know," Cherrytail interrupted, his tail-tip twitching. Turning to Poppystar, he added, "We can always use extra help with hunting, right?"

Poppystar heard a gasp from one of her Clanmates, and noticed one or two uneasy looks at the deputy's tone; it almost sounded as if he

was telling his Clan leader what to do. But for now she had to make it clear to every cat, including the visitors, that she was in charge. *I'll have a word with him about that later.*

"Of course," she meowed calmly. "Four extra cats—"

A loud wail from Echosong's den interrupted her. "My leg hurts!"

Poppystar realized that Birdpaw must have woken up. Echosong, who had been sitting at the entrance of his den, immediately vanished inside, with Rainfur hard on his paws.

"What's that?" Stumpy asked, looking shocked. The other newcomers were wide-eyed, too, their pelts beginning to bristle.

"Nothing to worry about," Poppystar reassured them. "One of our young cats had an accident earlier, but our medicine cat is taking care of him."

"A medicine cat?" Cinder echoed. "You mean you have a cat who looks after you when you're hurt or ill? I'd like to learn more about that."

Poppystar's pelt was still prickling with pride in the way Echosong had dealt with Birdpaw's injury. Surely there was no harm in sharing his skills with these visitors? "Yes, you can do that," she told Cinder. "Why don't you go down to Echosong's den and watch what he does? Sparrowpelt, go with her and tell Echosong I said it was all right for Cinder to be there."

The young dark brown tabby warrior dipped her head and waved her tail to beckon Cinder. "Thank you," she mewed to Poppystar, and padded off after Sparrowpelt. Poppystar noticed that Sparrowpelt managed to keep a tail-length ahead of the black she-cat, as if she didn't want her getting too close to her.

Poppystar also noticed that Cherrytail was staring at her with narrowed eyes, as if he was questioning her decision to let Cinder into the medicine cat's den.

Stop being so sensitive! she scolded herself. *Cherrytail is a good deputy. He was the one who said we should let the visitors see how we live in the*

first place.

Haze, Stumpy, and Cory were looking expectantly at Poppystar. It was like being faced with three new apprentices. Did they really want to learn what Clan cats did? Poppystar tried to think of any reason why she couldn't use the offer of free help in exchange for some hunting and fighting tips. With Harleymoon and Amber back in Twolegplace, there was room for some extra paws. Checking the fresh-kill pile, she saw it was still well stocked, so there was no point in sending them out on hunting patrols right now.

"Would you like to join a training session with our apprentices?" she suggested. "We all train together, because even warriors have to practice their battle skills."

At the front of the gathered cats, Nettlepaw gave an excited wriggle. "That would be great!" she exclaimed. "I can show them my best move."

"You mean the one where you get sand in your face?" Snookpaw teased. "Sure, we'll show them that one!"

Haze glanced at Stumpy and Cory, then nodded to Poppystar. "I think we'd all enjoy that," he meowed.

"Then let's go."

As soon as Poppystar spoke the three apprentices raced off up the gorge toward the flat training area just beyond the bend in the cliff. Waspwhisker's kits jumped up and pattered after them, only to be herded gently back by their mother.

"But we want to train, too!" Mintkit protested.

"That's right," Sandykit added. "We know lots of battle moves!"

"You're not even apprentices yet," Waspwhisker pointed out. "You're too young."

"Mouse dung!" Flamekit lashed his tail while Creekkit let out an annoyed hiss.

"Never mind, you can have your own practice by the pool," their mother consoled them. "Just as long as you don't fall in!"

The four kits let out squeaks of excitement and launched themselves toward the flat stretch of pebbles at the water's edge, with their mother trotting rapidly behind them.

The warriors headed up the gorge after the apprentices with Cherrytail in the lead. Fallowfern came down from his lookout post while Sparrowpelt and Rainfur emerged from Echosong's den and bounded up to them. "Wait for us!" Sparrowpelt panted.

As Poppystar was preparing to follow, Leafdapple paused beside her.

"Do you think some of us ought to hunt?" he asked, too softly for any other cat to hear. "There'll be four extra mouths to feed tonight."

Poppystar felt a stab of embarrassment that one of the daylight warriors had needed to point this out. "Oh, thanks." She also felt encouraged that the mottled pale cream and tabby tom had come up with the suggestion. Ever since Leafdapple had caused an argument by leaving on the day of the snow, he had worked hard, as if he was trying to make up for a bad decision. "Do you want to lead a patrol?"

"I can't," Leafdapple pointed out. "I have to supervise Snookpaw's training."

Poppystar nodded. "You're right; that's more important. Clovertail," she called, "will you lead a hunting patrol? Take Sharpclaw, Shrewtooth, and Rockshade with you."

Rockshade halted and glanced over her shoulder. "Do I have to?" she complained. "I wanted to join the training session."

"When your Clan leader tells you to, then you have to," Leafdapple meowed sharply.

Rockshade gave him a glare as she fell in behind Shrewtooth and Sharpclaw. "What would a *kittypet* know about it?" she muttered

into Sharpclaw's ear, just loud enough for Poppystar and Leafdapple to hear.

Poppystar opened her jaws, preparing a stinging rebuke, but Leafdapple shook his head and she stayed silent.

"It doesn't matter," the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom mewed. "Scolding her will only make her worse. Let's go and see what those apprentices are doing."

By the time Poppystar and Leafdapple reached the training area, Cherrytail was dividing the other cats into two groups.

"Tinycloud, you lead this one," he meowed, "and Fallowfern, you can lead the other."

Poppystar padded to the edge of the broad stretch of sand where Stumpy, Haze, and Cory were sitting.

"Do you do this all the time?" Stumpy asked, wide-eyed.

Poppystar shook her head. "Usually we train in smaller groups, or mentors practice battle moves with their apprentices. But Cherrytail likes to work on bigger exercises now and again."

"What do you want us to do?" Leafdapple called to Cherrytail, padding over to join his apprentice.

"You see this thorn tree?" Cherrytail flicked his tail toward a dead and twisted tree that stood a few tail-lengths away from the edge of the training area. "Whichever cat touches the trunk first wins for their patrol."

"I can do that!" Nettlepaw leaped to her paws and bounded off in the direction of the tree, only to skid to a halt as Cherrytail raised his tail to stop her.

"It's not going to be as easy as that, Nettlepaw," the Clan deputy warned with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "While you're trying to reach the tree, the other group will be trying too. What do you think will happen?"

Cobaltclaw took a step forward. "They'll try to stop us?"

Cherrytail gave her a curt nod, while Poppystar felt pleased that one of the daylight warriors had given the right answer.

"You'll need to think about attack and defense," he went on, addressing all the cats. "It's not just about getting there first; you have to stop the other group beating you to it. Can you think of any moves that would be useful?"

"Claw their ears off!" Sparrowpelt meowed loudly.

Cherrytail merely flicked one ear, while Bouncefire muttered, "Mouse-brain!"

Frecklepaw raised his tail. "We could choose one cat to run for the tree," he suggested. "And then the others could get in the way when the other group tries to stop them."

"Good idea!" Cobaltclaw praised his apprentice before Cherrytail could comment.

"Or we could create a diversion," Tinycloud meowed. "If one cat yowled 'Fox!" its teammates could dash for the tree while the other cats were looking for it."

"That would have been a great idea," Cherrytail commented drily, "if you hadn't just told every cat what you're going to do."

Tinycloud shrugged. "You asked for suggestions."

"So I did." Cherrytail twitched his whiskers. "Okay, I'll give you a moment to decide what your team will do, and when I say 'now,' start racing."

Poppystar watched as the two groups huddled together, whispering urgently while casting suspicious glances at their rivals.

"This is going to be really useful for us," Haze remarked. "It's the sort of thing that would help us get to a bit of prey before another cat."

"Or a good sleeping place," Cory added.

Poppystar nodded, remembering back to when she had been a loner, without a Clan to support her or a den that she could really call her own. "Life's much better when you're not on your own," she murmured, half to herself.

Stumpy opened her jaws to respond, but just then Cherrytail yowled, "Now!"

The two groups of cats exploded outward like seeds from a gorse pod. Sparrowpelt let out a screech and raced for the tree, ducking around Fallowfern's outstretched paws, but before she got within reach she was bowled over by Bouncefire. The two littermates rolled over together in a whirl of flailing paws and tails.

Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw worked as a team to weave their way past Rainfur, who didn't seem to know which cat to attack first. Poppystar thought they had a clear run to the tree, until Leafdapple came charging up, swatted Frecklepaw aside with one blow of his paw, and shouldered Cobaltclaw away. Rainfur wrapped her paws around the black tom's neck and dragged him over on his back.

Poppystar heard Stumpy gasp, and saw her and Cory wince as the battling cats tumbled into the dust, attacking one another with piercing caterwauls.

"It's all right," she reassured them. Pride warmed her from ears to tail-tip as her Clanmates showed off their strength and courage. *And Cherrytail knows exactly how to get the best from them.* "All claws are sheathed when they're training. And they have to learn to land lightly and get back onto their paws before an enemy can strike a death blow."

"That's a good move," Haze pointed out, angling his ears to where Tinycloud had just intercepted Fallowfern a couple of tail-lengths from the tree, hooked his paws out from under him, and leaped on top of him, pummeling him around the ears with his forepaws. "I'll have to remember that one."

Cherrytail, who was standing nearby, dipped his head to

acknowledge the loner's praise. "Our young cats learn that move almost as soon as they're apprenticed," he meowed. "We can teach you, if you want."

"We're here to learn," Haze responded.

Poppystar realized that she hadn't seen Snookpaw in the middle of the combat. Glancing around, she spotted the tip of a black paw poking out from the bottom of a heap of boulders between the fighting cats and the tree.

A heartbeat later, Snookpaw appeared, creeping along the ground in her best hunter's crouch. The other cats were too preoccupied to notice her. A tail-length from the tree she sprang into the air and landed just beside the trunk as if she was pouncing on prey.

"I did it!" she yowled triumphantly, stretching her paws up the trunk to score her claws down the bark. "I won!"

The tussling cats broke apart, Fallowfern's group spinning around to stare at the apprentice, while Tinycloud's patrol wore identical smug expressions, as if they'd just caught a plump thrush.

Tinycloud licked his paw and drew it over one ear. "Well done!" he told Snookpaw. "I knew they'd never spot you sneaking up like that if we kept them busy."

"Mouse dung!" Bouncefire exclaimed. "I never thought of that!"

Leafdapple bounded over to his apprentice and stretched his tail over the young cat's shoulders. "Good job," he meowed.

"Yes, very well done." Cherrytail's voice had an edge to it, as if he wasn't pleased that a daylight warrior had taken the most important part in her group's strategy. "Let's try something else, shall we?"

He gestured with his tail for the cats to gather around him. Poppystar saw that two long, striped hawk feathers lay beside his paws; as the cats approached he pushed them forward.

"This time," he began, "you have to take one of these feathers right up to the top of the thorn tree. The cat who gets there first wins."

"Then we should have a feather each," Sparrowpelt objected.

"No," Cherrytail explained patiently. "This is still an exercise for patrols. You have to decide whether you send one cat up the tree with the feather, or try to do it all together."

Tinycloud nodded. "I get it." he beckoned with his tail to summon his patrol to the other side of the sand.

"Would you like to join in?" Poppystar asked the visitors.

The three cats looked at one another, then nodded; Poppystar thought that Stumpy and Cory both seemed slightly reluctant.

"Good," Cherrytail mewed. "Haze and Stumpy, you join Fallowfern's patrol, and Cory, you go with Tinycloud."

The visitors moved off, but before he joined his group Haze halted and glanced over his shoulder. "Don't you ever join in?" he meowed to Poppystar.

"Sometimes," she replied, surprised by what seemed like a challenge. Flicking her tail at Cherrytail, she added, "Let's do it."

Her deputy nodded. He padded over toward Fallowfern's patrol, leaving Poppystar to join Tinycloud.

"What do you think we should do this time?" she meowed quietly, dipping her head to Tinycloud to show him that he was still in charge.

"They'll expect us to do something sneaky," the white tom began, "so I suggest we go straight for it. Rainfur, you take the feather and climb as fast as you can. The rest of us will try to keep Fallowfern's patrol out of your fur."

Rainfur nodded. "Sounds good to me."

Poppystar tensed as she waited for Cherrytail to give the signal to start. Energy coursed through her muscles. *I haven't felt like this in moons,* she thought. *I love training with my Clan.*

"Now!" Cherrytail yowled.

Grabbing the feather in her jaws, Rainfur raced for the tree, veering around Birdpaw as the apprentice tried to stop her. Poppystar realized that all of Fallowfern's patrol, except for Birdpaw and Bouncefire, were heading for the tree. Cherrytail was in the lead with the feather.

Poppystar flung herself into the crush, slamming into Cobaltclaw and carrying the black tom off his paws. She ducked underneath a blow from Haze, realizing that the scrawny loner had good instincts even without training. The blow she had avoided could have been better aimed, but he was strong, and not afraid to challenge a Clan leader.

Rainfur and Cherrytail reached the tree at the same moment. Rainfur flung herself up the trunk, but Leafdapple grabbed Cherrytail's tail in his jaws as the deputy sprang upward and dragged him down again. Cherrytail passed the feather rapidly to Frecklepaw before battering at Leafdapple with all four paws to break his grip.

Bouncefire jumped on Stumpy as she tried to reach the tree; Poppystar saw how the she-cat let herself go limp under her paws, then heave herself up and throw her off.

Nice move. Bouncefire should have been expecting that!

With a loud screech, Nettlepaw dashed up to Cory and swiped a paw across his face. The black tom stumbled, off balance, but managed to stay on his paws. He wasn't fast enough to catch Nettlepaw, though; the pale brown apprentice whirled around and headed off Tinycloud as he tried to break through to support Rainfur.

By now, Rainfur was halfway up the tree and climbing well. Frecklepaw, Cobaltclaw, and Fallowfern were scrambling up together a little way below, passing the feather from one to the other, while Cherrytail had thrown off Leafdapple and was racing to overtake Rainfur.

Poppystar paused, looking up. It didn't seem as if anything could stop Rainfur now. But just before she reached the top of the tree, the branch she was clinging to gave way with a loud crack. Rainfur swung there for a couple of heartbeats, dangling from the broken half of the branch as it gradually tore away from the tree. Then she plummeted downward, scrabbling at the thorny branches in an attempt to break her fall. She dropped the feather, which fluttered gently down and landed just in front of Poppystar's paws.

Frecklepaw, who held the other feather, had slid downward as he tried to avoid Rainfur. Cobaltclaw and Fallowfern were too far away to take the feather from him, and began clambering through the branches to reach him.

Sparrowpelt and Tinycloud were helping Rainfur to her paws. With a swift glance to make sure that the she-cat wasn't hurt, Poppystar snatched up the feather and leaped into the tree. Thrusting herself up from branch to branch, she suddenly realized that Cherrytail was crouched above her, his muscles tensed to fight once she came within reach.

I've got to get past him. If we start tussling up here, we'll both fall out of the tree.

She feinted to one side; Cherrytail moved to intercept her, and his paws slipped on the branch. With a hiss of annoyance he struggled to keep his balance, and Poppystar slid past him on the other side. Digging her claws into the topmost branch, she waved her tail and let out a triumphant yowl, managing not to let go of the feather. Down below, she could see her Clanmates circling at the foot of the tree with a mix of frustration and excitement in their eyes.

Tinycloud's triumphant shout drifted up to her. "She did it! Poppystar won!"

Chapter 7

"We won!" Tinycloud waved his tail as the cats poured back down the gorge toward the camp. "Snookpaw, you crept up to the tree like a shadow!"

The apprentice blinked in embarrassment and let out a pleased purr.

"We'll go hunting tomorrow," Leafdapple promised her. "And you can try out that crouch on real prey."

"It was just bad luck that we lost," Fallowfern meowed; Poppystar was relieved to see that none of his teammates was looking angry that Tinycloud's group had beaten them in both exercises.

"Yes, you just wait till next time," Nettlepaw murmured, her eyes gleaming.

"Did you see me trip up Sparrowpelt?" Bouncefire boasted. "She never saw me coming!"

"I got in some good blows over your ears, though," her sister retorted, giving her a flick on the shoulder with her tail. "You're lucky my claws were sheathed!"

"Frecklepaw, you did well, too." Cobaltclaw brushed his tail against his apprentice's shoulder. "You were a strong part of our group."

'It was fun," Frecklepaw replied, his eyes shining. "Can we do it again some time?" he asked Cherrytail shyly.

The deputy nodded. "Of course. It's the best way of keeping our skills sharp."

To Poppystar's surprise, Cherrytail sounded quite friendly as he spoke to the apprentice, as if he'd forgotten for now that he was a daylight warrior. *Training like this brings us closer together.*

Even the visiting cats seemed more at ease among the warriors now. "You could try racing up the cliff," Haze suggested, pausing to scan the rock face stretching above him. "We could give you some tips there; we're used to climbing walls in our Twolegplace."

"I'll think about it," Poppystar promised, though privately she wasn't sure it was a good idea. The memory of Birdpaw's fall was too vivid in her mind.

Or does that mean we ought to do more climbing practice? she wondered. *I'll have to discuss it with Cherrytail.*

"Or we could show you different ways of dealing with dogs." Cory scraped the ground with his front claws. "You must see plenty of them, with a Twolegplace so near."

Cherrytail gave him a long look. "Thanks. That could be very useful."

"And what to do about monsters," Stumpy put in. "Or young Twolegs." She sighed. "Sometimes I think we spend our whole lives dodging something."

"You wouldn't have to if you were in a Clan," Sparrowpelt meowed, her tail proudly raised. "Clan cats look out for one another."

"There's one thing that puzzles me," Haze went on, as if Sparrowpelt hadn't spoken. "In our Twolegplace, we hunt at night, and sleep in the day."

"But you're awake all day," Cory mewed. "Somehow it doesn't seem right for cats."

"Sandstar said this is how the other Clans live," Poppystar answered. "It's easier to hunt and patrol our borders in daylight."

"And fight, if we have to," Cherrytail added; there was the hint of a challenge in his voice. "We could hunt by night if we wanted to, but we prefer it this way."

Poppystar spotted Cory rolling his eyes at Stumpy, and heard him mutter, "Weird, or what?"

She didn't bother to argue with them. Skyclan hunted by day and slept by night because that was the way Sandstar and Fireheart had taught them. She couldn't see that it mattered. As Cherrytail had said, there was no reason why they couldn't hunt at night, and sometimes two or three warriors would go out on patrol after dark, especially if the night was fine and the moon shone brightly.

Rounding the last spur of rock, Poppystar saw the Rockpile and the camp ahead of her. Clovertail and his hunting patrol were padding along the stream, their jaws laden with prey. Tangle and Lichenfur were already crouching beside the fresh-kill pile, sharing a plump pigeon, while Patchfoot and Waspwhisker lay stretched out at the water's edge with Waspwhisker's kits scrambling all over them.

As the other cats gathered around the fresh-kill pile, choosing pieces of prey for themselves, Cinder emerged from Echosong's den and bounded up to join them.

"Haze, you *have* to go and meet Echosong!" she announced. "He's amazing! He has herbs to cure every illness you can think of, cobwebs to stop bleeding, ointment for cracked pads..."

"Echosong is great!" Bouncefire chimed in. "He looks after every cat in the Clan."

"Are you going to set up your own Clan?" Sparrowpelt asked Haze, tipping her head to one side. "Is that why you've come here?"

All four visiting cats looked shocked, their eyes wide and their fur beginning to bristle.

"Never!" Haze exclaimed.

"You should," Sparrowpelt insisted. "In a Clan you've always got other cats to watch your back."

"We share prey," Rockshade added. "No cat goes hungry."

"And we learn how to look after ourselves and our Clanmates." Nettlepaw stretched out her front paws and unsheathed her tiny claws. "Dogs and foxes had better watch out!"

"We help one another," Cobaltclaw mewed softly, while his apprentice Frecklepaw nodded. "We're friends."

Poppystar's chest swelled with pride as she heard how confident her Clanmates sounded. *Skyclan is strong!*

Haze shook his head. "We have our own way of life."

"That's right." Poppystar thought that Stumpy sounded regretful, but there was no hesitation as she backed up the scrawny gray tom. "We can learn from one another, but we don't want to decide that one way of life is better than all the others."

"Just what are they doing here, then?"

The muttered words came from behind Poppystar, she looked over her shoulder to see Lichenfur glaring at the visitors from narrowed amber eyes. Poppystar glanced back at the visitors, but none of them seemed to have heard; Cherrytail invited them to take prey from the fresh-kill pile and they settled down to eat.

"It's no surprise that other cats want to learn from us," Rockshade pointed out to the mottled gray elder. "We're so strong and fierce!"

"And skilled!" Bouncefire put in.

Lichenfur batted crossly at a pigeon feather that had got stuck to his nose. "And how did they hear about us, hmm? Squirrels passing whispers through the trees?"

"They said that Sandstar and Fireheart told them," Rockshade flashed back at him.

The gray tom grunted. "Maybe."

A light touch on her shoulder distracted Poppystar; she turned to see Sparrowpelt standing beside her, the tip of her tail still resting on Poppystar's pelt. "Poppystar, may I have a word with you, please?"

"Of course." Tipping her head to show Sparrowpelt she should follow, Poppystar picked her way among the feeding cats to a quiet

spot near the cliff face. "What is it?"

"I know how important the medicine cat is to a Clan," Sparrowpelt began, "and I like helping Echosong. I've learned a lot from him, but I really, really want to be a warrior, and I feel that I'm missing out on training." She dug her claws into the ground. "*Please* can I go back to ordinary warrior duties now?"

The small dark brown tabby cat was so earnest and solemn that Poppystar had to bite back a purr of amusement. "Of course," she meowed. "Just as long as you remember that if Echosong needs help, it's the duty of every warrior to respond, for the sake of the Clan."

Sparrowpelt nodded seriously, then scampered off, skidding to a halt beside her littermates. "Watch out!" Her voice was an excited squeak. "I'm back in training!"

Gazing after her, a sudden pang of concern banished Poppystar's amusement. *Echosong needs to start training an apprentice.* She wasn't exactly sure when a medicine cat usually started to train an apprentice, but it made sense to start sooner rather than later. *We depend so much on Echosong. What would we do if we lost him?*

Sparrowpelt obviously didn't have the passion she would need to live the life of a medicine cat. *It's going to be hard to find an apprentice,* Poppystar thought. *A medicine cat gives up so much for their Clan.*

Nettlepaw and Birdpaw were desperate to be warriors like their dead father, Petalnose, and Poppystar knew that Patchfoot would have the same ambition for the kits she was carrying now. *Maybe one of Waspwhisker's kits will show a skill for healing.* Poppystar swallowed a hiss of frustration. Echosong was young and healthy; worrying about his replacement seemed like one worry too far right now.

The sun was sinking down below the top of the cliffs, and shadows began to creep across the gorge. As the cats finished eating, Cherrytail began to sort out the evening patrols.

Leafdapple padded across to Poppystar, with Cobaltclaw, Snookpaw, and Frecklepaw just behind him. "Is everything all right?" he asked, concern in his amber eyes.

Poppystar took a breath, ready to tell the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom what was on her mind, then stopped herself. *I'm the Clan leader, it's my job to sort out these problems on my own.*

"Yes, everything's fine," she replied.

Leafdapple looked as if he didn't quite believe her, but all he said was, "We'll be off now, unless there's anything else you want us to do."

"No, we're all set for tonight. We'll see you again in the morning."

Leafdapple dipped his head and turned to go, then checked and looked back at his Clan leader. "I think you did the right thing about Harleymoon and Amber," he meowed. "Being part of Skyclan means that they have to respect the warrior code—and you—above anything else." He hesitated, then added, "If they don't show respect, then they don't deserve to be here."

Gratitude for the tom's support warmed Poppystar from ears to tail-tip. It meant a lot to her, especially coming from another daylight warrior. *Leafdapple knows it's a real privilege to be part of Skyclan.*

"Thank you," she murmured. "Good night, and may Starclan light your path."

"Good night," Leafdapple responded, and padded away to the bottom of the nearest trail, waving his tail to beckon Cobaltclaw and the two apprentices.

Poppystar rose and arched her back in a long stretch. The evening patrols had left, and the huddle around the fresh-kill pile was thinning out. Padding over to join the cats who remained, Poppystar saw that the four visitors were looking around curiously.

"Why are those cats leaving?" Cory asked, pointing with his tail at Leafdapple and the other daylight warriors, who had climbed halfway up the trail. "Are they part of a patrol?"

"They're kitty warriors," Sparrowpelt meowed, adding hastily as she caught Poppystar's eye, "I mean, *daylight* warriors. But they do all the same things as real warriors."

The visitors looked confused and Sharpclaw explained, "Leafdapple and the others still have housefolk, and spend part of their time in Twolegplace, living as kittypets." Her whiskers twitched in faint contempt. "Sometimes they come out at night, sometimes in the day."

"And you still let them join in with everything?" Haze asked, his surprise evident in his voice.

Poppystar felt her pelt beginning to rise defensively, and choked the feelings down. "Skyclan is young," she meowed. "We need all the help we can get to keep the fresh-kill pile stocked and the borders strong."

"But your borders won't be strong if half your warriors are eating kittypet slop in a Twoleg nest," Stumpy pointed out. Poppystar wondered how much her air of innocent inquiry was genuine. If the visitors wanted to cause an argument, they were going about it in exactly the right way.

"Skyclan would have no trouble defending itself without the extra Clan members," Cherrytail meowed. There was a hint of warning in his voice.

Narrowing her eyes, Poppystar watched the four visitors, but there was no sign of hostility from any of them. Haze merely nodded and murmured, "Interesting."

There's something they aren't telling us, Poppystar thought. *They haven't come here just to ask questions about Clan life.* She exchanged a glance with Cherrytail, and saw her suspicions reflected in her deputy's green eyes. *So I'm not imagining this! Cherrytail thinks there's something odd about these strangers, too.*

Poppystar felt as if her paws were slipping on the frozen surface of a river, with nothing to cling on to. She couldn't find any fault with the visitors so far—they had been polite, interested, and willing to

join in the battle training—but she felt unsettled and vulnerable with their presence in the camp. Had it been a mistake to let them take part in the training session? Had they learned anything they could use against Skyclan?

I wish they hadn't come.

The last of the sunlight had gone, and the first warriors of Starclan were appearing in the sky. A chill night breeze whispered along the gorge and ruffled Poppystar's fur.

Tinycloud parted his jaws in a huge yawn. "I'm off to my nest," he announced, rising to his paws.

"Yes, it's time," Waspwhisker agreed, sweeping her tail around to draw her kits close to her. "Come on, back to the nursery!"

Rainfur padded up to Poppystar and murmured in her ear, "Where are the visitors going to sleep?"

"There's not enough room for all of them in the warriors' den," Tinycloud pointed out. "We'd be sleeping on top of one another!"

"Maybe one of the new caves?" Rainfur suggested.

Poppystar thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, but I don't want them in there on their own. Some of our warriors should go with them."

Though she had spoken softly, Clovertail overheard her and shot her a keen glance. "Why, don't you trust them?"

Not as far as I could throw the Rockpile, Poppystar thought, but she wasn't going to admit it, even to her own warriors. "No, I just want them to feel that Skyclan welcomes them," she replied.

"I don't mind sleeping in one of the new dens," Clovertail meowed.

"Neither do I." Bouncefire sprang to her paws. "We'll get to try them first!"

"I'll go, too," Tinycloud offered, with another huge yawn. "But let's

do it now, okay?"

"Thank you." Poppystar dipped her head. "It'll be a good opportunity to see if the new dens will work for us."

"I want to sleep there, too!" Mintkit announced, his tiny paws kneading the ground.

"So do I!" Sandykit pattered up to Poppystar. 'We'll all go!"

"No, you won't." Waspwhisker stretched out her tail and drew her little daughter back. "You can't leave the nursery yet."

Mintkit leaned over to whisper into his sister's ear. "We'll sneak out when she's asleep."

Waspwhisker's ears twitched. "Don't even try," she mewed without looking around. "I hear everything, even when I'm asleep."

Gathering her kits together, she led them off to the nursery, with Patchfoot plodding behind, her belly heavy with her unborn kits. "But I'm not tired!" Mintkit wailed, stumbling over his paws as he headed for his nest.

"It's too late to start gathering fresh moss," Clovertail pointed out. "Let's move some over from the warrior's den; we can collect more in the morning."

"Good idea," Tinycloud agreed. "Come on," he added to the visitors. "We'll show you what to do."

Haze, Cory, and Cinder followed the Skyclan warriors up the trail to the main den, but Stumpy lingered behind with Poppystar. For a while the two she-cats sat close together, watching the warriors as they carried balls of moss out of their den, showing the visitors how to carry it across the cliff face toward the biggest of the new dens. In the twilight their pelts smudged together, so that it was hard for Poppystar to distinguish her own cats from the visitors.

She jumped when Stumpy spoke.

"We haven't come to cause you harm," the brown tabby she-cat

murmured. Her voice was distant, as if there was more that she did not say.

Poppystar dipped her head, watching the cats as they eddied between the dens. "I hope not," she whispered.

Chapter 8

A paw prodding him in the side woke Haze. "Wha...? Get off!" he growled.

He had spent the night hunting and prowling the streets of Twolegplace; it felt as though he had only just closed his eyes. His muscles still ached with tiredness.

The paw prodded Haze again, harder this time. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw Stumpy curled up close to him, and Winter's white tail poking out from behind a nearby garbage can.

Cory was standing over him, his amber eyes worried. "It's happening again," he meowed.

Haze scrambled out of his shallow nest among the tree roots and shook scraps of dead leaf from his pelt. "Where?"

Cory angled his ears toward the far side of the patch of rough ground behind the Twoleg nests. "Follow me." He led the way to the far corner near a gate in the Twoleg fence. "It's Swift, Shelly, and Bear," he added, glancing over his shoulder at Haze.

Haze felt his neck fur bristle. "They shouldn't be here."

Drawing closer, he soon spotted Swift. The huge brown tabby she-cat stood stiff-legged, his back arched and all his fur fluffed out. A low growl came from her throat. Just behind her stood Shelly and Bear, their eyes gleaming and their lips drawn back in a snarl.

Pinned up in the angle of the fence were Cinder and Tracy. Haze's heart thumped as he realized they were alone. "Where's Harper?" he muttered to himself.

A few scraps of food lay at his friends' paws: a couple of scrawny mice and a bone dragged out of a Twoleg garbage can.

"But it took us all night to get this!" Cinder was protesting as Haze

and Cory bounded up.

"Are you too idle to hunt now, Swift?" Haze snarled.

The brown tabby she-cat spun around; her eyes glittered with hostility. "We have an agreement, remember? Sunrise belongs to us."

Haze turned to look at the horizon where the sun would come up. A jumble of Twoleg rooftops was outlined against a sky that was barely turning pale with the first light of dawn.

"You're splitting whiskers," he hissed. "It's still dark."

Ignoring him, Swift took a menacing step forward. "If you can't keep to the rules, I'll force you to."

Haze curled his lip. "I've had enough of your threats. We were here first!"

Swift nodded to Bear. The cream-colored tom padded forward. Then without warning he sprang forward. Tracy let out a shriek as his claws scored down the side of her face, slashing at her eye.

Yowling with fury, Haze hurled himself at Swift and knocked her onto the ground. The brown tabby she-cat let out a screech and battered at him with all four paws. Haze could hear hisses and thuds behind him as the other cats clashed, and a thin wail from Tracy, who was trying to stagger away with blood streaming from her face.

There was a crash as a Twoleg door was flung open. Twoleg yowling split the air, along with the barking of dogs. Scrabbling on the ground under Swift's weight, Haze saw the nearby gate swing open and two dogs ran out. Their tongues lolled and they let out a flurry of high-pitched barking as they bounded toward the cats.

Swift and her two followers scrambled to their paws and streaked away, their belly fur brushing the ground. The dogs hurtled after them.

Haze limped over to the fence where Tracy had come to a stop,

blinded and dazed. Beckoning Cory with his tail, Haze gripped Tracy's scruff and the two toms half dragged, half carried her into hiding behind a stack of wood.

"Hurry!" Cinder urged. "The dogs are coming back."

Haze crouched in the shadow of the wood. He could hear the padding of the dogs' paws, their panting breath and their snuffling as they nosed around the wood stack. But they were too big to squeeze their way behind it and get at the cats.

"Help me! Please help me!" Tracy wailed, her uninjured eye wide with terror. "I'm going to die!"

"No, you're not," Haze told her bluntly. "You've lost an eye, that's all."

Tracy let out another wail.

"Don't make such a racket," Stumpy meowed; the brown tabby she-cat was wriggling her way along the back of the stack to crouch close to Tracy. "Here, let me clean you up."

She began to lick away the blood from her rumpled gray pelt, and her agonized wails sank to faint whimpering.

Haze could no longer hear the dogs. Peering around the edge of the stack, he saw the Twoleg holding the gate open and the dogs trotting back inside. Swift and the other cats had vanished. Gazing across the rough ground, Haze couldn't see any other cats except for Winter, who had fled up a tree when the fight started. Now he clung to a branch, staring down with frightened blue eyes.

Haze looked over his shoulder at the cats crouched behind to wood. "Where's Harper?"

"I have no idea," Cinder replied. "She started hunting with us, but then she went off on her own."

"How could you let her out of your sight?" Haze snapped, digging his claws into the ground. "I told you, no cat should be alone just now."

Cinder shrugged. "You can't stop Harper that easily."

"I'm going to look for her."

But before Haze could move, Stumpy looked up and flicked out her stumpy tail to rest it on his shoulder. "Harper's full grown now," she pointed out. "She can take care of herself."

Haze shook off Stumpy's tail. "It's my fault," he growled. "If she had been raised by her mother..."

"It's not your fault Harper's mother isn't here," Stumpy snapped. "Look, with any luck Swift will feel she's won enough battles for today. If Harper's not back by sunhigh, we'll go and look for her."

Leaving the others with Tracy, Haze slid out from behind the wood stack and raced across the rough ground to leap onto the roof of a shed. From there he looked out over the place he had always called home. The milky light of dawn uncovered thin grass and scrubby trees, surrounded by Twoleg fences and dens.

I know every hiding place, every puddle, every corner where mice make nests.

But now everything has changed. The familiar alleys and rooftops hid an enemy: Swift and the cats he had brought with him to steal this place from those who had lived here forever. Cats who would rather fight than hunt, who enjoyed inflicting fear and pain. Cats who prowled around looking for trouble.

And Harper is out there...

Chapter 9

"We may not have rival Clans on our borders, but there are always enemies out there!" Clovertail announced as he beckoned his patrol with his tail. "We have to make sure the border markings are good and fresh."

Poppystar watched as Leafdapple and Cobaltclaw padded up to join the pale brown warrior at the foot of the Rockpile. Their apprentices bounced eagerly behind them. It was the day after Cherrytail's training exercises, and the Clan leader was pleased to see her Clanmates so enthusiastic about regular tasks.

"I've never reset the markers before," Frecklepaw meowed. "This is really exciting!"

Snookpaw lashed her tail and fluffed up her neck fur. "Those foxes and rogue cats had better watch out! We'll see off anything that tries to set paw on Skyclan territory."

Amusement prickled Poppystar's pelt and she let out a soft purr of pride. *I hope those apprentices decide to stay with the Clan. They'll make fine warriors.*

She noticed Stumpy and Cory standing a few tail-lengths away, sharing bemused glances at the talk of border markers. "Would you like to join the patrol?" Poppystar invited. "If there's trouble, we could do with a few more paws."

Stumpy hesitated, then gave a restrained nod; Cory kneaded the ground with his front paws, his eyes gleaming. "Let's go!" he mewed.

Poppystar padded up to Clovertail with the Twolegplace cats following. "Okay if we join you?"

Surprise flickered in Clovertail's eyes as he dipped his head. "Of course, Poppystar."

He led the way up the trail, winding back and forth across the face of the cliff. Poppystar enjoyed the feeling of the breeze blowing through her pelt and the warmth of the stone under her pads. *It's good to be out of the camp. I haven't patrolled the borders for ages.*

When the patrol reached the top of the cliff, Cory pushed forward until he could squeeze between Clovertail and Poppystar as they weaved through the undergrowth. "What do you do if you meet a fox?" he puffed. "How can you practice fighting one?"

Poppystar flicked her ears to Clovertail, indicating that he should answer.

"We practice the usual battle moves," the pale brown warrior meowed. "They work on anything... foxes, other cats—"

"Badgers!" Snookpaw put in, waving her tail wildly.

"If you spot a badger, you tell a senior warrior right away," Leafdapple warned her, flicking his tail sharply over his apprentice's ear. "Do *not* try fighting one on your own."

Poppystar nodded. "Even senior warriors wouldn't tackle a badger without plenty of backup," she meowed. "And you'd have to be pretty stupid to attack a fox alone. That's why we train apprentices to fight as a team."

"We'd like to learn that," Cory commented, glancing over his shoulder at the other Twolegplace cat. "Wouldn't we, Stumpy?"

The brown tabby she-cat twitched her whiskers. "It would be useful."

"And what would you do if you found a strange scent on the border?" Cory went on eagerly.

"The first job would be to protect the camp—" Poppystar began.

"We'd follow the scent and track down the intruder," Cobaltclaw

meowed at the same moment.

"Huh?" Cory glanced from one to the other, looking baffled.

Cobaltclaw seemed to realize that he had interrupted his Clan leader, and had given advice that directly contradicted her. He slapped his tail over his jaws and took a step back. "Sorry," he muttered through a mouthful of fur.

Poppystar took a pace toward him and rested his tail-tip on the embarrassed tom's shoulder. "We're both right," she purred. "Protecting the camp and tracking down the intruder are equally important. What we did first would depend on the number of warriors available."

"And apprentices!" Frecklepaw squeaked, his eyes gleaming.

The patrol prowled on through the undergrowth, setting scent markers as they went. With a *mrrow* of satisfaction Poppystar skirted the boulder where Sandstar had set a marker when he first defined the Skyclan borders. The Clan had grown since then, and Poppystar had expanded the territory by setting the next marker on an ivy-covered tree stump several fox-lengths farther from the edge of the gorge. The change had brought a wide stretch of prey-rich woodland inside Skyclan's borders.

Clovertail was heading for the Twolegplace when he suddenly halted; his jaws were open to taste the air and the fur on his neck began to rise. Poppystar stopped beside him and tasted the air for herself.

No! It can't be! Panic jumped in Poppystar's throat. *Not now, when the Clan is doing so well!*

The rest of the patrol was milling around confusedly, not knowing why Clovertail and Poppystar had halted.

"What is it?" Frecklepaw called; the young cat sounded scared, and he flattened his ears as he gazed around as if he expected a fox to leap out of the undergrowth.

Cory stepped forward to Poppystar's side and took a good sniff of

the air. "Hey!" he exclaimed. "Even though we're on a border patrol, we're still allowed to hunt, right?" When none of the others replied, he glanced around, puzzled. "You do eat rats, don't you?"

The name of her Clan's worst enemy plunged Poppystar back into the memories she had tried so hard to forget: narrow rat faces with cruel eyes, snakelike tails, sharp claws, the overwhelming stench of rotting things. She felt once again the powerless surge of fury as the rat swarm rushed over her and her Clanmates, drowning them in a choking brown tide. She struggled to escape the barn; she gazed once more at Petalnose's body, bleeding from countless bites.

"Oh, wow! Rats! Just like in the stories!"

Frecklepaw's awed whisper brought Poppystar back to the present. She dug her claws into the ground to stop herself from fleeing back to the camp, chased by scenes she would never forget.

"Is something wrong?" Stumpy prompted, padding up with concern in her eyes.

Poppystar swallowed, forcing herself to speak calmly. "Skyclan had a lot of troubles with rats a couple of seasons ago," she explained. "We—"

"There were more rats than you could count!" Frecklepaw interrupted. "Sharpclaw told me about it. They wanted to kill all the cats and take the gorge—"

"That's enough." Poppystar's voice was curt. *If the rats are back, we have troubles enough, without an apprentice frightening the whole Clan.* "We need to work out what to do."

"Maybe we should go back to camp," Cobaltclaw suggested, shuffling his paws.

Poppystar could see Clovertail nodding; she would have liked nothing better than to agree. To turn her back on the problem and flee to the safety of the dens. *But that's not why Starclan made me Clan leader.*

"We need to check this out first," she meowed firmly, "and find out

where the scent is coming from." To Stumpy and Cory she added, "We won't hunt today."

Poppystar took the lead, creeping through the undergrowth with the patrol hard on her hindquarters. The scent of rats grew stronger, along with Twoleg scent and the stink of crow-food. The undergrowth around them became thicker and thicker, until it was hard to force a path through the stems; tendrils of brambles snagged the cats' fur and leaves clogged their ears and eyes, leaving them stumbling blindly.

Just when she thought they would have to turn back or risk getting lost, Poppystar crawled under a low-growing hazel branch and emerged into a clearing. In front of her rose a huge pile of Twoleg waste: bulging, shiny black pelts, some of them split and spilling out their contents onto the ground; squared-off red and gray stones like the ones Twolegs used to build their dens; huge things almost as big as monsters made of wood and some sort of soft pelt. The disgusting smells rolled out of the heap until they filled the air like fog.

"That... that's truly horrible," Poppystar whispered.

The other cats were pushing up behind her, and Poppystar stepped forward a couple of paces to let them into the clearing. For a few heartbeats they stood staring up at the mountain of waste.

"It's Twoleg stuff," Snookpaw declared, her voice full of contempt. "Why do they have to come and dump it here, in *our* territory?"

Cobaltclaw padded forward and sniffed at one of the huge things made of wood and pelts. "Why did they want to get rid of this?" he asked, bewildered. "It's a sofa!"

"What's a sofa?" Clovertail growled, eyeing the object suspiciously.

"Twolegs keep them in their dens," Snookpaw explained, unable to hide her glee that she knew something her Clanmates didn't. "And that thing there's a chair. The Twolegs sit on them." She licked one front paw. "They're pretty comfortable, actually."

"Chairs, bricks, cushions..." Cory was stalking around the outer edge of the pile. "Some Twoleg has cleared out the whole of their den!"

"There's chicken here." Stumpy had padded closer to the pile and was sniffing something that had spilled out of one of the black pelts. "Any cat want some?"

"You'd eat that?" Clovertail gasped. "It looks as if it's been dead for a moon!"

"Where we come from, you'd be glad of it," Stumpy replied, gulping down some of the pale crow-food.

Poppystar was appalled, though she tried to hide it. *These cats must be starving!* She crept closer to the mound. With every heartbeat she was more outraged that Twolegs would leave a disgusting heap like this in the middle of the forest, destroying the territory with its stink and filth.

She was just stretching out her neck to sniff one of the soft pelt-things, when she heard the scuttle of tiny paws coming from inside the heap. The wedge-shaped head of a rat poked out from a gap beneath a piece of wood, its eyes glittering with hostility.

Startled, Poppystar leaped back. Even though the rat vanished at the same time, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the dark hole where it had appeared. Now she could hear the sounds of more rats inside the pile, squeaking and chewing and rustling with sharp yellow teeth and pointed paws, their naked tails flicking and coiling like tiny snakes...

The whole heap is infested with them!

We'd better get back to camp and report this," Clovertail meowed at her shoulder.

"You're right," Poppystar replied, striving to make her voice as steady as his. 'We must call a Clan meeting and decide what to do."

"But it's no big deal, surely?" Cory protested as the patrol began to move off. 'What's wrong with a few rats?"

"I don't see why we can't hunt them," Stumpy put in. "The Clan would eat well for days with the prey from here."

Poppystar didn't stop to argue. Cats who hadn't survived the terrible battle at the edge of Twolegplace would find it hard to understand why every hair on her pelt was prickling with horror.

As she sprang down the last couple of tail-lengths into the camp, Poppystar spotted Tinycloud returning with his patrol; they had been renewing the scent markers on the other side of the gorge. Cherrytail was padding along the trail beside the river with his hunting patrol behind him; all of them carried fresh-kill.

Poppystar bounded across to intercept Cherrytail as he headed for the fresh-kill pile. "I want you to round up all the senior warriors," she meowed. "Every cat who was here when we had the battle with the rats."

Cherrytail cocked his head to one side. "Trouble?"

Poppystar nodded tensely. "I'll tell you when we're all together. Make sure Patchfoot and Echosong come as well. We'll meet in my den."

"Can I come, too?" Haze asked, rising from a flat rock on the edge of the stream and bounding over to them.

"Sure you can," Cherrytail replied, just as Poppystar was opening her jaws to refuse.

The Clan leader flashed an annoyed look at her deputy. *This is Clan business! We're not even including the daylight warriors, and it affects them.* But she couldn't argue with Cherrytail in front of Haze, so she gave the Twolegplace cat a curt nod and headed toward the trail that led up to her den.

By the time she reached it her Clanmates were beginning to arrive. Sharpclaw and Tinycloud padded through the entrance together, dipping their heads to their leader before sitting side by side with their tails wrapped around their paws. Clovertail appeared, looking grim, and a few heartbeats later Patchfoot followed, with Rainfur at

her side. Patchfoot's belly was bigger than ever, and she was panting from the effort of the climb.

Cherrytail and Haze were the last to appear, just behind Echosong, who slipped into the den and crouched beside the wall, his eyes fixed on Poppystar.

"That's every cat," the deputy announced. "What's all this about?"

Poppystar explained what the patrol had found as quickly as she could, trying to make the Clan see and smell the hideous pile of rubbish in the forest.

"Rats!" Sharpclaw exclaimed, exchanging a horrified glance with her brother Tinycloud. "Don't say we have to go through all that again!"

"No, no, we can't!" Rainfur's voice rose in a piteous wail, and Poppystar knew that she must be remembering the death of her mate, Petalnose. "We must all stay away from them—as far away as we can."

She sat with her head bowed; Patchfoot pressed up against her side and gave her ear a comforting lick.

Haze listened to the she-cats with a puzzled look in his eyes. When Rainfur had fallen silent, he turned to Poppystar. "What's all the fuss about?" he meowed. "It's only a few rats."

"Only a few rats!" Clovertail echoed, rolling his eyes.

"We've had problems with rats before," Cherrytail told the visitors, describing how a vast family of rats had attacked the cats in the gorge until their only option had been to take the battle to them and wipe them out.

"One of our warriors died," he finished, "and all of us were injured. We can't let these rats get strong enough to attack us again."

The Twolegplace cat looked thoughtful. "We're used to hunting rats for food," he meowed. "Maybe we can help."

Poppystar was about to thank him and assure him that the Clan

could cope, when Cherrytail forestalled her. "That would be great. What do you think we should do?"

That's the second time Cherrytail has made the decision for me, Poppystar twitched her tail irritably. *But maybe we should listen to what Haze has to say.* "Go ahead," she told him.

"Okay, suppose this is the rubbish heap." Cherrytail pulled out several clawfuls of moss and bracken from Poppystar's nest and piled it up in the midnight of the den. "The rats are in the middle, right? I suggest we take a patrol—as many cats as we can spare. Some of us should circle the pile and find the entrances where the rats go in and out. Then we block up most of them—"

"Why not all of them?" Sharpclaw interrupted, lashing her tail with excitement.

"Because we don't want the rats trapped inside there," the gray tom explained. "We want them *gone*. We want them to think they have a chance to escape. So we leave a couple of entrances unblocked, and put our best fighters just outside." With one paw he poked two holes in the heap of bracken. "One or two cats climb over the dump to frighten the rats and chase them out. Then when they run out"—Haze slid out his claws—"no more problem."

He stared around at the Skyclan cats, his gaze focused and confident. Poppystar realized he was sure his plan would work. *And it just might,* she thought. *It's worth a try.*

"We could try pulling the heap apart, too," Haze went on. "That would drive the rats out."

Clovertail wrinkled his nose. "Yuck!" he spat. "Have you seen that dump? It's *disgusting*!"

Haze shrugged. "You don't have to do that. But it's a way of finding food."

"You eat rats?" Tinycloud asked, his eyes stretched wide with dismay. "I'd sooner starve."

"So would I," Sharpclaw agreed. "Just thinking about it makes me

sick."

"Where I come from," Haze mewed drily, "you'll eat any sort of fresh-kill. I've often been thankful for a good plump rat."

Poppystar looked at her Clan, feeling ashamed and a bit guilty that they were being so picky. *We've never been really hungry,* she thought. *Maybe the time will come when rats won't seem so disgusting.*

"Right," Cherrytail meowed, rising to his paws. "Haze, will you organize some training patrols to prepare for the attack? We weren't properly prepared last time; that's how we lost Petalnose."

A stab of anger pierced Poppystar like a claw. *Have I said that we'll go with Haze's plan?*

"Are you saying Sandstar didn't know what he was doing?" she challenged, rising to confront Cherrytail. "He's the cat who created this Clan out of nothing, or have you forgotten that?"

"That's not the point," Cherrytail retorted, with a single lash of his tail. "I respect Sandstar, but he didn't have Haze's experience with rats. And experience is what we need here. This time things will be different."

Poppystar gazed at the tortoiseshell and white warrior, shocked that he seemed to be rejecting everything that Sandstar had done for Skyclan. Cherrytail's green gaze met hers boldly. *Sooner or later, I'll have to talk to Cherrytail about what's appropriate for a deputy and what isn't. But not now.*

Suppressing her anger, Poppystar dipped her head. "Haze, we'd all be grateful for your help. Cherrytail will help you organize patrols."

"Fine." Haze turned to go, with Cherrytail following.

The other warriors made their way out of the den after them, until only Echosong remained. His eyes were calm and sympathetic as he padded up to Poppystar and brushed his pelt against his leader's.

"The Clan will face new challenges which we have to deal with on our own," he mewed. "Sandstar didn't have time to teach us all he

knew."

Poppystar guessed that Echosong was trying to say that Cherrytail was still a loyal Clan cat. But it troubled her that Cherrytail seemed to have more respect for Haze than he did for Sandstar.

Sandstar did everything for us. None of us know anything about Haze.

Thinking back, Poppystar had always known that there was tension between Sandstar and Cherrytail, especially when she had become leader and Cherrytail was only deputy.

"Do you think Cherrytail blames me for taking the leadership of Skyclan?" she asked Echosong.

The young medicine cat regarded her gravely. "You didn't *take* anything," he reminded her. "Starclan sent me a sign—a vision of a storm of poppies to represent your name, Poppystorm. Sandstar and I knew that our warrior ancestors had chosen you."

"But does Cherrytail know it?" Poppystar muttered, half to herself.

"That's not the problem now." Echosong's voice was firm. "Every cat has to focus on getting rid of the rats."

His certainty soothed Poppystar, though she still wondered if she had made the right decision. *Cherrytail didn't give me time to think!* "Maybe we should let the rats stay and use them for fresh-kill," she suggested.

Echosong shook his head. "No, you were right with your first instinct. We should get rid of them as fast as we can." He paused to give his white chest fur a couple of licks. "Rats are Skyclan's oldest enemy," he meowed. His green gaze seemed to travel out of the den and back into the distant past when the first cats of Skyclan had made their home in the gorge. "They are not prey. They are rivals for everything that Skyclan needs to survive."

When Poppystar climbed down from her den she spotted Nettlepaw, Snookpaw, and Frecklepaw struggling to carry sticks and bramble tendrils up the gorge past the Rockpile.

"What are you doing?" she called.

Nettlepaw dropped her bundle to answer. "Haze is building a waste pile in the training area. It's going to be *huge!* He says it'll help us learn how to fight the rats."

"I've got to see this," Poppystar meowed.

She padded alongside the apprentices; rounding the spur of rock that separated the camp from the training area, she stopped dead in surprise. An enormous mound of twigs, bracken, brambles, and other debris covered the middle of the open space.

How did Haze build something that big so quickly?

Most of the Clan cats were watching from the edge of the training area. Leafdapple and Cobaltclaw were sitting under the overhang of the cliff, while Rockshade, Bouncefire, and Sparrowpelt crouched in the shadow of the mound; the young warriors were quivering with excitement, as if they could see their enemies in front of them and were ready to pounce. Shrewtooth, however, was hanging back, shifting uneasily from paw to paw. Sharpclaw and Tinycloud were huddled together with Clovertail at the far side of the area; Poppystar could hear that he was telling them more about the place where they had found the rats, in all its disgusting detail.

Meanwhile, Haze and Cory stood beside the heap, their heads close together. Cherrytail waited a fox-length away, listening intently.

"It should still be a couple of tail-lengths higher," Cory decided. "And it was more... more close-packed. You could climb up it and it would take the weight of a cat."

"It would take too long to build something like that," Haze argued. "This will work for our plans. Well done," he added to the apprentices as they staggered up and dropped their burdens at the edge of the pile. "That's enough for now. Can you make some of this bracken into bundles about the size of rats?"

The apprentices got to work while Poppystar padded across the training area to join Cherrytail.

Her deputy turned toward her, his eyes gleaming. "With the help of our guests, we'll soon show the rats they're not welcome here."

"We'll turn them into crow-food," Snookpaw growled. "Haze knows just what he's doing."

"Right!" Nettlepaw exclaimed as she clawed a bunch of bracken into a rat-shape. "Maybe if he'd been here before, my father wouldn't have died."

Poppystar shook her head; she didn't believe that any cat could have changed the result of the first battle, however much they knew about rats. *You can't understand if you weren't there,* she thought.

Hearing a sigh, she glanced over her shoulder to see Rainfur standing close by, her eyes full of sorrow at the mention of her dead mate. Poppystar eased back until she stood at her side.

"Petalnose didn't make any mistakes," Rainfur whispered to her leader. "He died fighting for his Clan."

"He was a fine warrior," Poppystar agreed, touching her nose to Rainfur's ear.

"Now they're talking as if he was stupid," Rainfur went on, her voice quivering with grief. "As if he went out unprepared to tackle an enemy that was too strong for him."

"Every cat who was there knows that isn't true," Poppystar comforted her.

Rainfur let out another long sigh, and leaned her head briefly against Poppystar's shoulder.

Poppystar watched Haze patting the last of the twigs and brambles into place. "That looks great," she mewed, not wanting to seem as if she begrudged praise for the visitors' help. "But the Clan still has mouths to feed. Some cats need to go on a hunting patrol. Tinycloud, will—"

"No," Cherrytail interrupted, "every cat has to stay here for Haze's battle training."

Poppystar felt her claws slide out. *Who exactly is the Clan leader here?* "We need to restock the fresh-kill pile," she declared firmly. "Haze can hold another training session in the morning."

"But we don't want to hunt," Sharpclaw objected. "We want to learn to fight rats."

"Yes, that's more important than our next meal," Tinycloud agreed.

Poppystar raised her tail to cut short a full-scale argument, but before she could speak again Leafdapple stepped forward.

"I'll lead a patrol if you like," he offered. "Cobaltclaw will come with me, and our apprentices. Shrewtooth, will you come as well?"

"Glad to!" the black she-cat gasped, looking relieved to be away from the terrifying preparations for battle.

Poppystar blinked gratefully at the kittypet. "Thanks. Go anywhere you like, but stay away from the rats."

"We'll hunt on the other side of the gorge," Leafdapple promised, waving his tail to gather his patrol together.

Poppystar watched him lead his cats away, then turned back to the training area, where Haze was gathering the rest of the Clan together for the training session to start.

"I want to be the first cat to attack a rat," Nettlepaw insisted, her fur bristling as she angled her ears at the rat shaped bundle of bracken she had made. "Petalnose was my father, and this is my chance to avenge his death!"

"I want to fight, too." Birdpaw's disconsolate voice came from behind Poppystar; she turned her head to see the injured apprentice limping around the spur of rock with Echosong beside him. "It's not fair!"

"And us!" All four of Waspwhisker's kits bundled up to the edge of the training area, scampering ahead of their mother. "We'll kill lots of rats!"

"No, I told you, you're only allowed to watch," Waspwhisker meowed.

Poppystar stifled a purr of amusement. Her earlier panic was being replaced by a warm glow of pride as she watched her Clanmates rise to the challenge of the rats.

Is this what it takes to unite us as one Clan? Did Starclan *send the rats?*

Chapter 10

Poppystar reached the top of the gorge and crept into the undergrowth, flinching as thorns scraped along her pelt. The moon had already set, but the stars shed enough light to show her, as she glanced back, the dark outlines of her Clanmates slipping onto the cliff top. The first glimmer of dawn had yet to show itself above the rocks.

Five sunrises had passed since Clovertail's patrol had found the mound of Twoleg waste in the forest. Every cat had practiced Haze's battle moves until they could do them in their sleep.

And I have. Each night Poppystar's dreams had been full of thin faces and glittering, malignant eyes, the squeaking of rats and the stench of blood. *Now is the time to end it.*

A cool night breeze rustled the leaves above her head as Poppystar headed toward the rat heap. Cherrytail and Haze had pressed up beside her, the other warriors following. Every cat kept low, gliding along the ground, their paw steps making no more noise than raindrops dripping from branches after a shower.

Suddenly a sharp snapping noise broke the silence. Poppystar jumped, her heart beginning to pound.

Cherrytail whipped around. "What was that?" he hissed.

Every cat had halted, their neck fur bristling, their gazes flicking warily to the shadows. Shrewtooth looked frozen with fright.

"Sorry." Bouncefire's voice came from the darkness at the back of the patrol, sounding embarrassed. "I stepped on a twig."

"Great!" Tinycloud grunted. "Now the rats know we're coming!"

"It doesn't matter," Haze assured him. "All the rats will do is hide deeper inside their nest. And they'll soon find out there's nowhere

safe in there."

As Poppystar's heartbeat slowed, she waved her tail as a signal for the patrol to move on. She could feel the tension in the air now, like the sparks before a storm broke.

This is the first time I've led my Clan into battle. Starclan, please give us strength and bring all our warriors home safe.

The first faint light of dawn was filtering down into the forest. Poppystar's nose twitched as the breeze carried a foul stench toward her. A few fox-lengths ahead, the waste pile was just visible through the trees, pale in the half-light. Even if the rats had heard the patrol approaching, there was no time to change their plans.

This is it.

Poppystar signaled with her tail for the patrol to halt and turned to face her Clanmates. Cherrytail turned with her; his eyes blazed with a green light and his tortoiseshell and white fur bristled. Poppystar could almost taste his desire to avenge the death of Petalnose.

"You're sure you remember the plan?" he demanded, his gaze raking over the patrol. "We block most of the holes, then frighten the rats so they try to escape through the holes we've left open. And then..." He bared his teeth, giving Haze a glance to make sure he had repeated the loner's plan accurately.

Haze replied with a curt nod. "They won't know what hit them."

Poppystar began to feel more confident as she listened to her deputy and saw the determination in his eyes. *We can win this battle!*

She could see tension mounting even higher in the listening cats, in their twitching tails and flexing claws. Fear-scent came from the senior warriors, those who had battled the rats before, in spite of their struggles to hide it. The younger warriors picked it up, too; Shrewtooth was visibly trembling.

It's time to get on with this, Poppystar decided. *Before some cat starts to panic.*

"Tinycloud, you led a patrol here yesterday," she mewed softly. "Did you locate the exits from the heap?"

The young white tom nodded. "We didn't want to get too close," he explained, "in case the rats spotted us. But we think there are three gaps on the far side from where we are now, one on each side, and two in front—one up high where that piece of wood is poking out, and the other low down, underneath the Twoleg sofa."

Peering through the trees, Poppystar could make out the two front holes Tinycloud had mentioned: dark cracks leading into the center of the dump. She forced herself to stay calm as she thought of rats pouring out of them.

"We'll leave these two exits open," she meowed, relieved that her voice stayed steady. "Clovertail, Sparrowpelt, and Rainfur, you go around the back and block the exits there. Sharpclaw, you deal with the one on that side"—Poppystar gestured with her tail—"and Bouncefire, you take the one over there. When the holes are blocked, stay beside them, in case any rats try to force their way out."

She paused briefly, letting her gaze travel across the cats standing in front of her. "Cherrytail, you're in charge of catching the rats as they come out of the front."

Her deputy didn't speak, but his eyes glittered and he gave a single lash of his tail.

"Fallowfern, Tinycloud, Rockshade, Haze, Cinder, and Cory, go with Cherrytail."

"And what about the rest of us?" Nettlepaw asked, fluffing up her fur as if she wanted to make herself look twice her size. "We want to fight rats, too!"

"In a moment you'll have all the rats you want," Poppystar promised. "You and Stumpy and Shrewtooth will come with me, once the exits are blocked. We'll prowl over the heap and chase the rats out so Cherrytail's patrol can deal with them."

Nettlepaw's eyes glowed. "I'll *terrify* them," she hissed, extending her claws.

Dawn light was strengthening as Poppystar padded around to the back of the heap, following Sparrowpelt, Rainfur, and Clovertail. On the way they passed Bouncefire, who was struggling to push a chunk of wood up the side of the heap, toward a gap between two shiny black pelts. Poppystar gave her a nod of approval as she crept past, silently thanking Haze for all the practice in the gorge. Her confidence grew with every paw step as she saw how focused and determined her warriors were. Pride stabbed through her as she watched her Clan working together.

Then she remembered the fight with the rats in the barn, and her confidence ebbed as she pictured the hordes of evil creatures who had poured out from their hiding places with only one thought in their narrow skulls: *Kill cats!* Her breath choked in her throat as she recalled the horror of being overwhelmed in a tide of brown bodies, drowning in their reek and their stifling fur. She had barely fought her way out then.

Are there enough of us here? Maybe I should have brought the daylight warriors, too.

She hadn't included them, because the attack had started too early for them to arrive from their Twoleg nest. Now she wondered whether it would have been better to wait.

But Cherrytail didn't include them in the practices, so maybe he didn't think they'd have the strength to tackle the rats.

Shaking her head to clear it, Poppystar told herself that it was far too late to call up reinforcements. She halted and gazed up at the mound.

Great Starclan, it's big!

She had checked out the waste pile several times before, but she had never come as close as this. The towering heap seemed to fill the whole sky, and its reek was all around her. It looked far more difficult to climb than the pile of sticks they had used for practice in

the gorge. Rustling and scraping and the high-pitched squeaks of rats came from deep inside it, and Poppystar suppressed a shudder.

Beside her, Rainfur, Clovertail, and Sparrowpelt were collecting sticks and lumps of wood and stone to block the three exits on this side. Stumpy padded up to her.

"Should we be climbing up now?" she murmured. "We need to be ready."

Poppystar nodded. She beckoned to Nettlepaw and Shrewtooth, who were waiting a few tail-lengths away, and began to claw her way up the pile.

The stench grew stronger and flies buzzed around Poppystar's head as she climbed. Every hair on her pelt stood on end. Sometimes the heap felt sticky underpaw, and she tried not to imagine what might be clinging to her fur. *I don't look forward to licking that off, whatever it is!* Sometimes the pile gave under her weight, and she imagined it collapsing altogether, pitching her down into the rat-filled darkness. She could still hear the tiny rat noises; to her relief their enemies hadn't yet realized that they were under attack.

Poppystar had nearly reached the top of the pile when she heard the beginning of a yowl of alarm, quickly cut off. Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted Nettlepaw a tail-length below her, clinging by her forepaws to a jutting piece of wood while her hind paws dangled in the air, her tail waving wildly.

"Sorry!" the apprentice, meeting Poppystar's gaze. "I slipped."

Scrabbling with her hind paws, she managed to haul herself up again. Poppystar tensed, all her senses alert for the rats to start pouring out before they were ready, but there was no change in the busy scratching and squeaking just beneath her paws.

"It's okay," she murmured, with a nod to Nettlepaw. "They didn't hear you. Try to be more careful."

A fox-length below Nettlepaw, Shrewtooth had frozen with her paws splayed out across one of the squashy Twoleg pelts and her

eyes glazed with terror. Before Poppystar could speak, Stumpy scrambled up beside her.

"Come on," she whispered. "You're doing fine."

As Shrewtooth managed to put one quivering paw in front of the next, Poppystar felt grateful for the Twolegplace cat's level head and steady courage. *This would be a lot harder without Stumpy and her friends,* she admitted to herself.

At last Poppystar found a firm paw hold on a squared-off piece of stone, and let her gaze travel around the clearing. At the bottom of the pile, just below her, she could see Clovertail, Sparrowpelt, and Rainfur, each braced against the blocked exits. Farther around, Bouncefire was in position; she couldn't see Sharpclaw on the far side. The curve of the mound cut off her view of Cherrytail and his patrol, but she had to assume that they were ready.

The Skyclan leader let her gaze sweep around one last time. Then she threw back her head and yowled, "Skyclan, attack!"

Her voice echoed through the forest, and the mound came alive beneath her paws. The rats' voices rose in squeals of mingled panic and fury. Poppystar could hear their frantic scrambling underneath her paws, and felt the stone she was standing on shift.

A rat's head popped out of the hole that Sparrowpelt had blocked, trying to force its way past the barrier of sticks and brambles. The dark brown tabby warrior slashed it twice across its nose with one forepaw, and the rat vanished again.

"Well done!" Poppystar called out as Sparrowpelt shoved the sticks back into place. "Force them back! Cherrytail and his cats will do the killing."

Rainfur was hissing furiously at two rats who were trying to escape through her exit, and Clovertail darted across to help her. The sight of two enraged cats terrified the rats, who slid back into the mound without a blow being struck.

Reassured that her warriors knew what to do, Poppystar scrambled

up to the very top of the heap, digging in her claws and yowling to frighten the rats out of the mound and into the claws of the waiting fighters. She caught glimpses of Stumpy and Nettlepaw doing the same, while Shrewtooth perched on a spiky and battered Twoleg object with his pelt bristling and his jaws gaping in a spine-chilling shriek. The mound lurched under Poppystar's paws; new gaps were starting to open up. A wiry rat body broke into the open a couple of mouse-lengths from her nose, fleeing down the side of the heap before she could swipe at it. A sharp squeal from below, abruptly cut off, told her that another cat had been waiting for it.

Nettlepaw appeared, clawing her way over the top of a Twoleg chair, her lips drawn back in a threatening snarl. Suddenly the chair gave way, sinking deeper into the waste, carrying the apprentice down with it into a gaping hole. Nettlepaw let out a terrified screech, scrabbling vainly at loose debris as she sank into the depths of the mound.

Poppystar leaped forward and grabbed the she-cat's scruff before she disappeared altogether. Digging in her hind claws, she hauled Nettlepaw upward. Two or three rats followed; one of them snapped at Nettlepaw's tail. Poppystar, with her teeth still sunk in the apprentice's scruff, had no way of attacking, but the apprentice kicked out with her hind paws and caught the rat across the side of its head. It toppled off the mound in a flurry of waving paws and tail and vanished.

"Thanks," Nettlepaw gasped as her Clan leader set her down on a more solid part of the heap.

"You did well with that rat," Poppystar panted.

From where she stood now, Poppystar could look down and see the battle at the front of the mound where the exits had been left open. Horror cramped her belly when she saw Cherrytail and his patrol surrounded by a surging mass of rats. Every cat was spattered with blood.

Starclan, please let it be the rats' blood and not their own!

Haze's plan had been for two warriors to attack each rat, but the

rats were too many, and too fast, for that. They squealed and scrabbled as the Skyclan warriors pounced on them, but there were always more to replace them. Poppystar spotted Rockshade just below her, struggling with a massive rat. Her paws slashed at the rat's flanks, but the creature had its teeth fastened in her shoulder, and Rockshade couldn't throw it off.

With a yowl of rage, Poppystar launched herself down the heap, her paws barely touching the side. With one swipe of her paw she tore the rat's throat open and it sagged to the ground, releasing its grip on Rockshade.

Poppystar flinched as blood came welling out of the wound she had made. *This is wrong; we should kill only to eat.* But she knew too well that if she and her Clan didn't succeed in wiping out the rats, they would become prey themselves.

"Thanks!" Rockshade grunted, whirling to block another rat as it fled from the heap toward the safety of the trees.

Poppystar reared up on her hind paws as she felt tiny claws fastening in her back fur. The rat fell off and scrambled away, squealing in terror, only to run straight into Tinycloud's paws.

A huge female rat crashed into Poppystar's haunches, with Cory hard on its tail. The two cats battled side by side; still reluctant to kill, Poppystar found herself sheathed her claws as she gave the rat a blow on the side of the head.

"No!" a furious voice yowled from behind her.

Glancing back, Poppystar saw Cherrytail; her deputy's tortoiseshell and white fur was soaked with blood, and there was a wild light in his eyes.

"Show no mercy!" he snarled. "Kill or be killed!"

He's right, Poppystar thought. Her claws slid out again, and she snatched at the she-rat's throat, while Cory bit down on its neck from the other side. The rat squeaked and died, while Poppystar shared a brief glance of satisfaction with the Twolegplace cat.

The battle surged around her in a wave of fur and teeth. She winced with disgust as her paws slipped on blood-soaked grass. The air was filled with the reek of blood and the shrieking of cats and rats. Poppystar leaped and twisted and struck out instinctively, fighting to escape from her nightmare of glittering eyes and sharp fangs. She wasn't aware of her Clanmates any longer, only the wiry brown bodies that fell beneath her claws.

The rat under her paws stopped struggling. Poppystar spun around to face the next enemy and saw Stumpy standing in front of her. The Twolegplace cat's ear was ripped and there were teeth marks along her jaw; she stood still, her chest heaving. Beyond her, more cats were standing like islands in a lake of dead rats.

"It's over," Stumpy panted.

"No more rats." Cherrytail made his way to Poppystar's side, his paws shoving aside rat bodies as he approached.

Poppystar looked around. Heaps of dead rats lay around her, and blood-smeared trails through the bracken and long grass at the edge of the clearing showed where a few of the rats had dragged themselves into the trees to die. The waste heap was torn apart into smaller piles, with separate bits of debris scattered all over the clearing.

The rats won't be able to use that as a refuge anymore.

The shrieking had given way to heavy silence, broken only by the wheezing breath of Fallowfern, who lay on his side a few fox-lengths away. Nettlepaw was heading toward him, scrambling over the bodies of rats to reach her mentor's side.

"He's hurt!" she wailed.

Poppystar picked her way through the dead rats to reach her injured Clanmate. Fallowfern was bleeding from a deep scratch down his flank; the wound stretched under his belly almost to his tail.

The pale brown tom lifted his head and blinked pain-filled eyes.

"I'm fine," he rasped. "Just give me a couple of heartbeats to rest."

"You need more than that," Poppystar meowed, dipping her head to give Fallowdern's ear a lick. "We'll help you back to camp and let Echosong take a look at you."

"I finished off the rat that did it," Fallowfern murmured, lying down again and closing his eyes.

The rest of the cats gathered around him. All of them had some sort of injury—scratches, torn claws, nicked ears—though none as bad as Fallowfern's or Stumpy's. Poppystar felt the sting of a scratch on her shoulder; she had never even noticed the rat who gave it to her.

"We won," she announced.

None of the cats responded; Poppystar met Cherrytail's gaze, both cats acknowledging silently that this was not the time for celebration.

"Let's go back to camp," she meowed.

Chapter 11

"Fallowfern, lie down here in the sun," Echosong directed. "You too, Stumpy. The rest of you, go and wash yourselves in the pool below the Rockpile. Come back here when you're clean."

By the time the Clan returned to camp the sun was peering up over the top of the rocks, though patches of deep shade still lay in the bottom of the gorge. Poppystar and Sharpclaw had helped Fallowfern down the trail to the medicine cat's den; though the warrior kept insisting he was fine, he was exhausted by the time he collapsed in the patch of warmth just outside Echosong's cave.

Stumpy sat beside him and started licking his pelt to clear up the blood around the wound.

"Wash ourselves?" Clovertail echoed disbelievingly as Echosong gave his last order. "In the pool?"

Murmurs of protest came from the cats behind him.

"I don't like getting into water," Rainfur complained. "Can't I just lick myself clean?"

"And it's dangerous," Shrewtooth added, casting a nervous glance to where the water surged into the pool from beneath the rocks. "Some cat might drown."

"I can't believe you expect us to get wet all over," Tinycloud grumbled.

"But that's what I said." Confronted with so many injuries, Echosong was trying to work efficiently, but Poppystar could hear a slight edge to his voice as he faced the protesting warriors. "I can't treat a wound if I can't see it, and you need to get rid of the stench of rats."

Cherrytail flicked his ears irritably. "Come on. We'd better get on with it."

He led the way toward the pool and slowly lowered himself into the water, looking as if it felt worse than a rat bite. Reluctantly, the rest of the cats followed him.

Birdpaw limped out of Echosong's den, halting with a squeak of dismay at the sight of so many injuries. "You're *all* hurt!" he mewed, his eyes stretching wide.

"Yes, but you should have seen the rats," his littermate, Nettlepaw, replied with grim satisfaction. 'They won't bother us anymore."

More agitated squeaking filled the air as Waspwhisker's kits tumbled down the trail, followed by their mother and Patchfoot.

"Come back!" Waspwhisker called, as the kits pelted toward Fallowfern. "Don't get in Echosong's way."

The kits ignored her, climbing all over their father, who by now was barely conscious. He gave a grunt of pain, and Stumpy tried to thrust the kits back with one paw. "Don't do that," she told them. "You're hurting him."

"But we want to help!" Mintkit protested.

Poppystar was heading over to intervene, when she spotted Cory returning from the pool, shaking water from his pelt. He snaked his tail over Fallowfern's back and gathered in the four kits. "Come with me, and I'll tell you all about the battle," he promised.

Instantly the kits bounced off their father and crowded around him.

"Did you kill lots of rats?"

"Was there lots of blood?"

"Will you show us your battle moves?"

Waspwhisker padded up with concern in her blue eyes. "Be careful; you might frighten them," she murmured to Cory.

The Twolegplace cat touched her shoulder reassuringly with the tip of his tail. "Don't worry. I won't tell them anything too scary."

Waspwhisker gazed after Cory as he herded the kits toward a flat rock near the water's edge, then followed Patchfoot, who was speaking to Echosong.

"Tell us what we can do to help," the black and white she-cat meowed.

"Thanks, Patchfoot. You could take over from Stumpy and get Fallowfern cleaned up. Stumpy's wounded, too, and she needs to rest. And it would be a big help if you could fetch them both some water."

"I'll do that," Waspwhisker mewed instantly, darting off toward the river.

Poppystar let her gaze travel around the gorge, making sure that all the injured cats were ready to be treated. Sparrowpelt, who had only a few shallow scratches on one side, was slipping in and out of Echosong's den, fetching him the herbs he asked for, no longer reluctant to help the medicine cat. Cherrytail had washed off the blood from his own pelt and was making sure that the rest of the Clan did the same, firmly dunking Shrewtooth in the pool as the black she-cat shivered on the edge, then hauling her out again.

Reassured that no cat needed her help, Poppystar padded down to the pool and slid into the water. After the first cold shock she enjoyed the lap of the waves against her scratches, and the sight of rat blood streaming away from her fur. Relaxing, she looked up and saw three cats appear at the top of the gorge and begin scrambling down the trail: Leafdapple, Cobaltclaw, and Frecklepaw. They picked up the pace when they spotted their injured Clanmates, and skidded to a halt among the cats waiting for Echosong.

"What happened?" Leafdapple demanded. "Did you fight the rats?"

Frecklepaw's eyes stretched wide in horror at the sight of Fallowfern, now lying on his side with his eyes closed. "Is he dead?" he whispered.

"Yes, we fought the rats," Clovertail meowed proudly. "We set off before dawn this morning, and we ripped their pelts off. And no cat

is dead. Fallowfern will be just fine."

"Why didn't you let us know when the attack would be?" Cobaltclaw hissed with a lash of her tail. "We could have been useful!"

At the sound of anger in the black tom's voice, Poppystar hauled herself out of the pool and padded over to him. "We didn't leave you out because we don't value your help," she mewed, touching her nose to Cobaltclaw's ear.

Cobaltclaw twitched away from her. "Then why weren't we told?"

"We needed to use cats who were ready to leave at any moment," Cherrytail put in, thrusting his way through the cats to Poppystar's side. "Including during the night."

"We could have been here if we'd been warned." Leafdapple didn't sound as angry as Cobaltclaw, but he was clearly offended. Turning to Poppystar, he added, "Are you hurt?"

"Er, I'm fine, thanks," Poppystar replied, startled by the change of focus. "Just a scratch on my shoulder."

Leafdapple leaned closer to give the wound a sniff. 'That's more than 'a scratch,'" he commented. "You need some herbs. I'll fetch them for you—what should I look for?"

"Marigold!" Frecklepaw chirped. "I know what it looks like. I'll get it," he offered, racing toward the medicine cat's den. A moment later he returned with a mouthful of leaves, chewed them up carefully, and plastered the pulp onto Poppystar's injury.

"Echosong said you should make sure to let him have a look at it," he told Poppystar when he had finished. "Just in case I didn't do it right."

"I'm sure you did," Poppystar responded, flexing her shoulder. "It feels better already."

Frecklepaw's eyes sparkled. "I like watching Echosong," he admitted.

"Then you'd better go and see if you can help him some more," Poppystar meowed. "With so many warriors to treat, he'll be glad of an extra pair of paws."

"Thank you!" Frecklepaw dashed off again with his tail straight up in the air.

Poppystar let out an affectionate purr, then turned back to Cobaltclaw and Leafdapple. Both cats were shifting their paws awkwardly, as if they felt out of place among so many battle-scarred warriors.

"I guess we could go on a hunting patrol," Leafdapple suggested, with a glance at the black tom. "We need to restock the fresh-kill pile."

"Thanks, good idea," Poppystar meowed, though she felt uneasy as she watched them go. Two was a very small number for a patrol. Perhaps the Clan needed Harleymoon and Amber more than she had realized; she hoped they wanted to come back when their banishment was over.

The pain of Poppystar's scratch was ebbing, but she thought she had better let Echosong check it out, and then see if there was anything she could do to help. As she approached the medicine cat, she saw him instructing Frecklepaw, who was pressing a pad of cobweb against Rockshade's wounded ear.

"That's right," Echosong prompted. "Make sure all the edges are sealed. Good. Now you can collect another pawful of cobweb and treat that bite on Sharpclaw's hind leg. Make sure the wound is really clean first."

"I will, Echosong," Frecklepaw mewed.

Meanwhile Echosong started patting marigold pulp along Fallowfern's scratch. "Sparrowpelt, fetch Fallowfern a poppy head," he directed the dark brown tabby warrior. "Give him three seeds and no more. Now, Bouncefire, let's have a look at you."

Poppystar was impressed by the way the young medicine cat could

think of three things at once, and treat the wounded warriors without keeping them waiting for long. Before she could find out if Echosong had a task for her, Cherrytail came limping up; a nasty bite on his leg needed attention but the light of battle still gleamed in his eyes.

"They fought well," he meowed.

Poppystar wasn't sure who he meant. "The new warriors? Yes, they —"

"No, the Twolegplace cats," Cherrytail interrupted. "We owe our victory to Haze—you know that, don't you?"

"He helped us a lot," Poppystar began, "but every cat—"

Cherrytail interrupted again. "Any Clan would be lucky to have them as warriors."

Poppystar felt faintly surprised. "You think they should stay? They've only been here for a quarter moon," she pointed out. "And they haven't said anything about their plans."

Cherrytail twitched his ears. "Maybe they're waiting for an invitation to join us," he suggested.

"Maybe." Somehow Poppystar wasn't so sure.

"We owe you a lot," Cherrytail mewed to Cinder, who padded up at that moment; Poppystar wondered how much the black she-cat had heard of their conversation. "Without you and your friends, we never would have defeated the rats."

Cinder shrugged. "It's the least we could do in return for your shelter."

Poppystar's paws tingled with uneasiness. *Why are you here?* she wondered yet again. *What do you want, to make you risk your own pelts in battle, just because we let you stay here in the gorge?*

Chapter 12

The sun had gone down, leaving the uneven line of Twoleg rooftops outlined against a scarlet sky. Haze clambered up a pile of Twoleg waste, pushing aside pieces of debris, his nose twitching. Last time he'd been here, the pile had been teeming with rats. Now all he could find were stale scents and droppings.

"Not a whisker," Stumpy spat, looking down at him from the top of the heap. "Some other cats must have cleaned the place out already."

"Swift!" Haze hissed.

"We can't be sure of that," Stumpy pointed out. "There are other cats living here; any of them could have taken the rats."

"I know it's Swift," Haze growled. "She doesn't want us living here, so she's trying to starve us." He jumped down from the mound, swiping bad-temperedly at an empty Twoleg box as he landed, and stalked away.

Before he had taken more than three paw steps, he glimpsed a flash of gray and brown out of the corner of his eye. Spinning around, he saw Harper sitting in the shadow of a wall.

"Where have you been?"

Harper's neck fur fluffed up. "Around."

"Well, stay close by in future."

The gray and brown tabby she-cat sprang to her paws. "Why?" she challenged. "I can look after myself."

"There are some dangerous cats around," Haze growled.

To his surprise Harper bounded forward and pushed her forehead

against his shoulder with an affectionate purr. "More dangerous than you?" she meowed, looking up; her eyes were glimmering with amusement. "Surely not!"

For a moment Haze wanted to cover her ears with licks as he used to when she was a kit. But those days were long gone. When he didn't say anything, he saw the amusement fade from Harper's eyes.

"I'm going to see how Tracy's getting on," she mewed, turning and stalking across the patch of waste ground.

Haze watched her go, sadness twisting in his belly.

"You won't tame that one so easily."

Haze jumped as he realized that Cinder had padded up behind him. "I don't want to tame her," he responded gruffly. "I want to keep her safe."

"She's old enough to keep herself safe," Cinder pointed out.

"She needs a mother."

Cinder touched her tail-tip briefly to her friend's shoulder. "You've done the best you could."

"But it's not enough, is it?" Haze replied. "It won't ever be enough."

Haze padded across the waste ground, in the opposite direction from the one Harper had taken. At the edge of the open space he leaped onto the fence and began walking along the top, balancing easily. The Twoleg gardens were deserted in the gathering night. Though lights showed in some of the dens, the shadows lay thickly where Haze prowled.

Haze's whiskers quivered and he opened his jaws to taste the air. *Rabbit!* His belly rumbled and water flooded his jaws, but he knew that this scent came from a rabbit in a Twoleg cage.

I'd be in more trouble than it's worth if I tried to catch it.

As Haze padded along the fence top the smell grew stronger. A new

taint mingled with it: the scent of fear. Haze wondered if young Twolegs were trying to play with the rabbit again; he knew that the rabbit didn't like it. Then a terrified shriek rose from the garden just ahead. Haze froze. This wasn't because of clumsy young Twolegs. The rabbit was being *hunted!*

Haze bounded along the fence top until he came to the garden where the rabbit lived. Halting in the shade of a holly tree, he looked down at the shiny mesh cage in the middle of the smooth green grass. The black and white rabbit crouched close to the ground, while Bear and Shelly circled the cage. Their pelts bristled and their teeth were bared in a snarl. On the far side of the grass, the Twoleg nest was dark and silent.

"Stop it!" Haze called out. "That rabbit isn't prey."

Bear and Shelly halted and stared up at him.

"Oh, really?" Bear sneered. "You'd hunt it fast enough if you weren't scared of the Twolegs."

"I'm not scared!" Haze growled.

"Prove it!" Shelly challenged. "Help us catch this rabbit."

"No." Haze began to back away along the fence. *No good will come of this.*

But before he could leave, Shelly ran at the cage and rocked it upward with one massive shoulder. The rabbit shrieked again and shrank back into the corner farthest from the gap. Bear pressed himself to the ground and reached under the cage with one paw to drag the creature into the open.

The rabbit crouched on the grass, trembling, as first Bear, then Shelly darted at it, lashing out with their paws to rip its ears. Tufts of black and white fur drifted over the grass, and Haze spotted a dark stain beginning to spread on the rabbit's shoulder.

"Kill it cleanly, at least," he growled.

Bear looked up at him, his cream colored pelt pale in the gathering

darkness. "Make us."

He turned back to the terrified rabbit, motioning Shelly to stand aside. The rabbit tried to run; Bear let it cover a few tail-lengths before pouncing on it again and cuffing it around the head.

The rabbit let out a long, high-pitched wail and struggled as both cats returned to the attack. Its powerful fear-scent flooded over Haze and his belly growled with hunger. He slid his claws in and out, scoring the wooden fence. All his instincts were telling him to leap down and join in, to claim his share of the prey, but he knew what the results would be.

We can't afford to make enemies of the Twolegs.

Finally the rabbit collapsed, limp with shock, its chest heaving with fast, panting breaths. Haze couldn't bear to watch any longer. Leaping down from the fence he raced across the grass and shouldered Shelly away from the quivering creature.

"What do you think you're doing?" the ginger and white she-cat demanded.

"I'm going to put the poor thing out of its misery," Haze snarled.

"Don't think you get to share," Bear spat. "This is *our* prey."

Ignoring him, Haze lifted one paw to deliver a killing blow. At the same moment Shelly and Bear both threw their heads back and let out bloodcurdling yowls. A window in the Twoleg nest lit up; yellow light flooded over the grass. The door of the best crashed open and loud Twoleg voices came from inside.

Haze glanced around. Bear and Shelly had vanished, leaving him alone in the middle of the lighted patch of grass, crouched over the shivering rabbit. The Twoleg yowling grew louder. A huge male Twoleg appeared in the doorway, brandishing a bristly wooden pole. His mate and two Twoleg kits followed him out, wailing, as he charged at Haze.

The rabbit scrambled to its paws and took off. Haze spun around and fled for the fence. Something sailed over his head and crashed

into the bushes a tail-length away. Without looking back he scrambled to the top of the fence and ran along it, past the waste ground and down into the alley. The Twoleg yowling died away behind him.

Haze stood still, his heart thumping. He shivered at the thought of the Twoleg stick landing across his back, cracking his spine. *We keep our heads down around Twolegs. And now this happens.*

"Enjoy your fresh-kill, loser?"

Haze spun around as he recognized Shelly's voice. Her and Bear were sitting farther down the alley in the shadow of some garbage cans, calmly cleaning their paws.

"I didn't hurt that rabbit, and you know it," Haze snarled, padding toward them. "You set me up."

"You set yourself up." Bear drew his paws over one ear.

"Maybe it'll teach you not to interfere in the future," Shelly sneered. She rose to her paws and padded forward until she stood nose to nose with Haze.

Haze tensed. He was here alone; if they attacked, he would be torn apart. He'd seen what Bear was prepared to do to another cat.

But Shelly stayed relaxed, and her voice was almost friendly, though Haze saw hostility gleaming in her narrowed eyes. "I've seen Harper around a lot lately," she remarked. "Next time, it might be a tuft of her fur that's left beside a dead Twoleg pet."

"Leave Harper out of this," Haze growled. "And don't make threats you can't keep."

"Oh, they're not threats." Bear spoke from behind Shelly, arching his back in a long, luxurious stretch and showing his sharp teeth in a yawn. "They're *promises*."

Chapter 13

Poppystar padded up to the fresh-kill pile and dropped her squirrel onto it. "We hunted well today," she observed.

Clovertail nodded as he deposited his own prey—a mouse and two shrews—on the pile. Cory had caught two mice, and Shrewtooth was pleased with herself for once, for chasing a rabbit and bringing it down.

The sun had risen above the gorge, but it was so early that dew still clung to the grass. The cats who had not been chosen for the dawn patrols were beginning to emerge from their dens. Tinycloud bounded down the trail, halted briefly at the bottom to give one ear a good scratch, then headed for the river to drink. Fallowfern clambered down after him, slower and more awkward because of the wound from the rat battle. Poppystar padded across to meet him as he reached the foot of the trail.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "Is that scratch healing well?"

"I'm fine, Poppystar," the pale brown tom replied. "I'm just fed up with being stuck in the gorge. Please can I go out on patrol today?"

"Not until Echosong says you can," Poppystar told him, narrowing her eyes as she examined his wound. It still looked raw, and she guessed it wouldn't take much for it to open up again.

Fallowfern slid out his claws and gave the ground in front of him a frustrated scrape. "I was afraid you would say that."

"Just be patient," Poppystar advised him. "It's only a few days since the battle."

"It feels like moons," Fallowfern retorted gloomily; following Tinycloud to the water, he crouched down to lap.

Poppystar let her gaze travel around the gorge as more cats appeared. She could almost taste the sense of pride and strength that her warriors shared, united by the victory over the rats. They stalked confidently out of their dens, as if they were showing off their healing wounds.

We'll be back to full strength soon, Poppystar told herself with a purr of satisfaction.

Several cats appeared at the top of the gorge and began running lightly down the trail: Sharpclaw was returning with her border patrol. The young dark ginger tabby leaped down the last few tail-lengths and bounded up to Poppystar.

"We checked out the waste heap," she reported. "There was no sign of rats, and all the scents were stale."

"That's good news," Poppystar purred.

"Everything was quiet," Cinder added, padding up behind Sharpclaw. "We picked up the scent of a loner, but it seemed to lead straight out of the territory again."

Poppystar's whiskers twitched. "A loner? Where was this?"

"Between the rubbish heap and the Twolegplace," Sharpclaw replied, flicking her tail to show Poppystar the direction. "Cinder's right. The trail seemed to veer into our territory for a few fox-lengths and then head out again."

"Maybe the scent markers put it off," Cinder suggested.

"You could be right." Poppystar gave one paw a reflective lick. It didn't seem as if the loner was a threat, but there was no harm in staying alert. "All the same, we'll keep an eye on that part of the territory, just in case it comes back."

The border patrol chose fresh-kill from the pile and settled down to eat. Poppystar found a flat, sun-warmed stone and sat with her tail wrapped around her paws, watching her Clan as the gorge stirred into full wakefulness.

The Twolegplace cats no longer stood out from the rest of the Clan: Cinder was gulping down a sparrow and chatting to Sharpclaw about that morning's patrol; Stumpy had joined Fallowfern and Tinycloud at the water's edge, where Echosong was checking on Fallowfern's kits, while Cherrytail and Haze were prowling up and down near the foot of the Rockpile, discussing hunting techniques.

All four of the newcomers took part in their share of patrols, brought in a good amount of fresh-kill, and were gentle with the oldest and youngest members of the Clan. Poppystar was especially relieved that Cherrytail and Haze were getting on so well. Her deputy's brusque manner could be off-putting, and he hadn't made any close friends within his own Clan.

I'm still sure there's something Haze's not telling us, she thought. *But he's fair and loyal to his friends, and I appreciate that.*

Loud meows from the top of the cliff announced the arrival of the daylight warriors. Frecklepaw skidded down the trail in a cloud of sand, well ahead of the others, and came to a panting halt in front of Poppystar.

"I promised to prepare some herb poultices for Echosong before the first training session," he gasped. "Is that okay?"

Before Poppystar could reply, Echosong came bounding up. "Well done, Frecklepaw," he meowed. "You've got here really early." Blinking at Poppystar, he added, "It's all right if I borrow him for a while?"

Poppystar nodded, a bit surprised that Frecklepaw seemed to prefer helping the medicine cat to hunting or battle practice.

"Good," Echosong went on briskly. "Frecklepaw, I need a poultice of daisy leaves; Lichenfur has been complaining of back pain. And you'd better do some burdock root. I think a few of the rat bites will need another dose."

"Right, Echosong," Frecklepaw meowed happily, racing off toward the medicine cat's den.

Echosong watched him go, then headed to the waterside for a drink. Poppystar followed her and hesitated for a moment as the medicine cat lapped.

"Do you trust Frecklepaw to work without you to keep an eye on him?" she asked eventually.

The young silver tabby turned to her, scattering shining drops from his whiskers. "Oh, yes. Frecklepaw knows what he's doing. He—"

Echosong broke off at the sound of his name being called. Frecklepaw had popped his head outside the den.

"We're really low on tansy," he reported. "And if Lichenfur has a bad back, he'll probably need some."

"You're right; thanks for spotting that," the medicine cat replied.

"I could look for some while I'm out training," Frecklepaw offered.

"That would be really helpful," meowed Echosong.

With a happy *mrrow* Frecklepaw disappeared inside the den again.

"He's learned a lot," Poppystar meowed, impressed.

Echosong nodded, then turned back to the river, crouching down to lap a few more mouthfuls of water. In a couple of heartbeats he stood up again, swiping his tongue around his jaws to catch the last drops. "I need to think about finding an apprentice," he remarked.

"You mean Frecklepaw?" Poppystar had just seen for herself the young cat's enthusiasm and competence, but he wasn't sure that he was the right choice for Echosong. "Can a medicine cat live part of the time with Twolegs?"

"I don't know," Echosong admitted. "But Frecklepaw has natural talent, and he enjoys the work. He learns quickly, too."

Poppystar still wasn't convinced. "Has Starclan sent you any signs about this?" she asked.

Echosong shook his head. "I don't think I need a sign, when Frecklepaw is perfect for the job."

Poppystar couldn't agree. This was far more difficult than accepting kittypets into the Clan as warriors. A medicine cat needed to have a special link with Starclan. Poppystar didn't know if their ancestors would accept a cat who was not a full member of a Clan. "I'll think about it," she promised.

Echosong dipped his head in acceptance, but Poppystar could see he wasn't happy with her reply. "I'd better get on." The medicine cat spoke more curtly than usual.

"Yes... fine." Poppystar flinched at the tension that had sprung between them. "Send Frecklepaw out as soon as you can. He's supposed to be hunting with Cobaltclaw."

Echosong nodded and stalked off.

Poppystar watched him go with an unaccustomed feeling of helplessness. She had grown used to being challenged by Cherrytail over her decisions about the daylight warriors; she hadn't expected the same challenge from a cat she regarded as her closest friend in Skyclan.

"Full moon tonight!" Sparrowpelt gave an excited little bounce. "Rockshade, I'll race you up to the Skyrock!"

Poppystar, coming across the two young warriors on her way down from her den, was about to remind them that they weren't apprentices any longer. The trail that led up to the ledge under the rim of the gorge was narrow, and there was a dangerous jump from there to the Skyrock itself. As warriors, they should know better than to take stupid risks.

But before she could speak, Stumpy looked up from where she was sunning herself with the other visiting cats. "What's the Skyrock?" she meowed.

"That, up there." Rockshade raised her tail to point at the flat ledge jutting out over the gorge. "The whole Clan meets there when the

moon is full."

"Why?" Cinder asked, getting up to join the younger warriors. "Can't you meet down here in the gorge?"

"It has to be a special place," Sparrowpelt explained. "And up there we're closer to Starclan—that's the spirits of our warrior ancestors."

Cinder exchanged a mystified glance with Cory. "Warrior ancestors? What are you meowing about?"

Poppystar stopped to listen but stayed in the background, interested to know what the visiting cats would think about the idea that the spirits of their ancestors watched over them. *Or do they? Maybe it's only Clan cats who go to Starclan when they die.*

"Every moon we hold a Gathering on the Skyrock," Sparrowpelt began. "We tell Starclan what has been happening in the Clan, and we discuss stuff."

"Er... sounds interesting," Haze mewed, looking mystified.

"Back in the forest where Sandstar lives," Rockshade went on, "there are four Clans. They meet at the full moon, too, and exchange their news, and there's a truce so they're not allowed to fight one another."

"We can't do all of that, because we're only one Clan," her littermate meowed, sounding rather disappointed. "But we still Gather. It's what Clan cats do."

The Twolegplace cats were silent for a moment.

"So... you go up to the top of the cliff to talk to dead cats?" Cory meowed at last.

"No, that's not exactly what we do," Sparrowpelt objected, with a glance at Rockshade; she sounded confused, as if she wasn't sure what else she could say to make the visitors understand what a Gathering was.

"I guess you have to be there..." Rockshade began.

Poppystar padded forward, deciding that it was time to intervene. "Sparrowpelt, Rockshade, go find Cherrytail. He'll be organizing the hunting patrols. Off you go."

The warriors bounded off at once, looking distinctly relieved.

"You'll find out all about the Gathering later," Poppystar reassured the other cats.

"Oh, are we invited?" Stumpy asked, sounding pleased.

"Every cat comes," Poppystar told her. *And if you're going to join this Clan,* she added to herself, *you'll have to learn about Starclan sooner or later.*

Poppystar padded in the paw steps of the two young warriors, toward the center of the camp. She glanced over her shoulder as she heard Leafdapple call her name.

"Poppystar, could you give me a couple of moments, please?"

Leafdapple was padding down the trail with his apprentice Snookpaw just behind him. "I... er... I want you to check out the hunting move I've been teaching Snookpaw," he explained. "I'm not sure she's got it quite right. Could we go to the training area?"

"Sure." Poppystar felt faintly uneasy. Leafdapple looked as if he had more on his mind than a hunting move. *More trouble between the daylight warriors and the Clan cats?* she wondered.

When they reached the training area, Leafdapple waved Snookpaw into the middle of the empty space. "I've been showing Snookpaw how to leap onto a rabbit's back and roll it over before it can run. Snookpaw, show Poppystar."

The apprentice dropped into the hunter's crouch and crept up on her imaginary rabbit. Poppystar watched approvingly as she waggled her haunches and leaped into the air, coming down on all four paws and flipping herself onto her back as if she was gripping the rabbit in her claws.

"That looks fine to me," she meowed. "Snookpaw, you might want to keep your legs tighter to your body as you roll. That way, you'll keep a firmer hold on the rabbit."

"Thanks, Poppystar." Snookpaw scrambled to her paws and shook sand from her black and white pelt.

"Why don't you practice that a few times?" Leafdapple suggested. "We'll watch you."

The apprentice nodded and crouched down again, creeping low across the open space.

"You've taught her well," Poppystar commented. "Now, what is this *really* about?"

Leafdapple looked guilty. "I wanted to know," he began, "whether the visitors have said anything to you about their plans."

That was the last question Poppystar had expected him to ask, yet on reflection she realized she shouldn't be surprised. *The whole Clan must be speculating about what the Twolegplace cats want.*

"No," she meowed, annoyed that she sounded defensive. "They haven't told me anything."

"Maybe you should ask them." Leafdapple hesitated, and then went on, "I've seen them leading patrols of Skyclan cats in Twolegplace."

Poppystar's belly lurched and she felt her neck fur beginning to bristle. "That's not possible. No patrols go hunting in Twolegplace."

"I saw them." Leafdapple leaned closer toward her, his amber eyes full of concern. "Last night I was sitting on the wall around my housefolk's garden, in the shade of a thick bush. No cat could have seen me from below, and the flowers on the bush hid my scent. They walked right past me: Haze and Cherrytail, Nettlepaw and Rockshade."

Poppystar met his worried gaze. "You must have been mistaken," she meowed, trying to sound calm.

Leafdapple shook his head, but he didn't seem inclined to argue. Inside, Poppystar felt puzzled and unsure. She could imagine some of the younger warriors setting off to explore Twolegplace, imagining it would be an adventure. *But Cherrytail is Clan deputy! What was* he *doing there?* She didn't like the fact, either, that he had taken Nettlepaw, whom he was mentoring while Fallowfern recovered from his wound. *The Twolegplace is no place for an apprentice.*

As she watched Snookpaw practice her move, possibilities drifted through her mind like clouds. Had Cherrytail and the others been chasing off a dog? If so, why hadn't he reported it?

"You can stop now, Snookpaw," she called as the apprentice leaped and rolled once again. "You've got the move down."

Snookpaw scrambled up and bounced over to her mentor at the edge of the training area. "Can we go and try it for real?" she puffed.

"Tomorrow," Leafdapple promised. He added, "You would catch even more rabbits if you were a bit thinner." He gave his apprentice a gentle prod in the side.

"Aw, but I have to eat two lots of food every day!" Snookpaw protested. "My housefolk get really upset if I don't eat theirs. And they've made it extra tasty lately."

"You poor thing. I feel so sorry for you," Leafdapple murmured. He caught Poppystar's eyes, and they shared an amused purr at the way Snookpaw seemed genuinely downcast. Poppystar shoved the thought of Cherrytail leading a patrol into Twolegplace to the back of her mind. Skyclan was strong and contented now, with the rats safely defeated. There was no need to go looking for trouble by challenging her deputy on something that might have a perfectly innocent explanation.

As the last scarlet traces of sunlight faded from the sky, Poppystar kept casting glances toward the top of the gorge. This was the time when Harleymoon and Amber were allowed to come back to the Clan.

But will they want to? Surely they should be here by now.

All the other daylight warriors had stayed late in the gorge so they could attend the Gathering. Snookpaw and Frecklepaw were part of an excited huddle with their fellow apprentices, while Leafdapple and Cobaltclaw waited with Clovertail and Rainfur for the signal to climb the trail.

"I wonder if I was too harsh with Harleymoon and Amber," Poppystar murmured to herself. As Echosong padded past with a bunch of yarrow leaves, she meowed out loud, "Echosong, do you think I should have banished those two daylight warriors?"

"Course," the medicine cat mumbled around his mouthful of herbs. "They've got to learn." He headed for his den to store the leaves away.

Poppystar watched Echosong's fluffy tail whisk out of sight. *I'll feel a lot better when they arrive. But what will I do if they don't come back?*

Excited squeaking broke out behind her as Waspwhisker brought her kits down from the nursery. "Mintkit, sit still," she ordered. "Your neck fur is all rumpled, and I can't lick it straight when you're bouncing around like that."

Poppystar turned to watch the kits bundling around their mother.

"I'm going to sit on the Skyrock!" Sandykit announced. "I'm going to jump right over the gap and sit with the warriors!"

"You certainly are *not*," her mother scolded, pausing in her firm tongue strokes over Mintkit's neck. Her sharp gaze traveled over her kits. "The Skyrock is for warriors. Besides, you're too young to leap across the gap, and if even *one* of you tries it, all four of you will go straight back to the nursery."

"But—" Flamekit protested.

"Not another word. You're only kits; you can't possibly jump that far."

"Can too," Sandykit muttered; her mother flicked her over the ear

with the tip of her tail.

Poppystar was distracted from the antics of the kits as Fallowfern limped past. "How is your wound?" she called to him. "Do you think you can leap across to the Skyrock?"

The pale brown tom nodded determinedly. "I'll be fine, Poppystar."

She wasn't certain, but before she could protest she heard yowls of greeting coming from the top of the cliff. Relief rushed through her from nose to tail-tip as she recognized the outlines of Harleymoon and Amber.

"Hey, look who's here!" Clovertail exclaimed as the two daylight warriors raced down the trail.

Their Clanmates clustered around to welcome them back to the Clan, and Poppystar let out a sigh of relief. *Now maybe we can carry on and put their bad behavior behind us.*

As the initial excitement died down, Harleymoon spotted the Twolegplace cats, who were sitting together in the shadow of the Rockpile. Her white neck fur started to fluff up. "Who are they?" she demanded, flicking her ears in their direction.

"They're cats from another Twolegplace," Rockshade explained, springing to her paws and padding over to the visitors. "Sandstar met them on his way here. This is Haze," she began, touching each cat on the shoulder with her tail-tip as she spoke their names, "and this is Stumpy, Cory, and Cinder. These are Harleymoon and Amber," she told the visitors. "They... er... they haven't been here for a while. They're kitty... I mean, *daylight* warriors like Leafdapple and Cobaltclaw."

Haze dipped his head. "We're glad to meet you."

Harleymoon and Amber didn't look as if they wanted to return the compliment. "What are they doing here?" Amber asked.

"They're just staying here for a while," Clovertail replied. "They've been helping us out."

"What, with hunting and everything?" Harleymoon sounded shocked.

Poppystar suppressed a sigh. The questions were natural enough, she supposed, but did she have to sound so unwelcoming?

"They've been great, actually," Cherrytail meowed. "We would never have won the rat battle without them."

"Rat battle?" Amber spun around to face the Clan deputy. "What rat battle?"

"There was this huge heap of old stuff that the Twolegs left on our territory." Sharpclaw's eyes stretched wide with excitement as she began to explain. "It was *full* of rats."

"We found it on patrol," Clovertail added. "We had to get rid of the rats, and Haze and the others knew what to do. They have a lot of trouble with rats in their Twolegplace."

"They *eat* rats," Nettlepaw chipped in.

"Haze built a practice heap here in the gorge," Rainfur went on, "and we all learned the right moves for fighting rats."

"Then we sneaked up to the heap one night..." Bouncefire began to describe the attack, how the Clan had blocked off all but two exits and drove the rats out into the claws of the waiting warriors.

"I was badly wounded," Fallowfern told the kittypets, proudly turning sideways to display his scar. "I might have died if it wasn't for Echosong."

"But no cat died," Cherrytail finished. "And we owe that to our visitors."

"I wish I'd been there," Amber meowed enviously as she gave Fallowfern's scar a sniff. "I'd have killed loads of rats."

"Oh, you wouldn't have been there anyway," Rockshade told her. "It was too early in the morning for you."

"None of the daylight warriors were there," Nettlepaw mewed, as Harleymoon and Amber looked puzzled.

"But the Twolegplace cats were there?" Harleymoon checked, sounding offended.

"Yes, they organized the attack," Sharpclaw replied.

Harleymoon and Amber exchanged a hurt glance. Poppystar could feel the rising tension. She was annoyed with Rockshade and Nettlepaw for not being more sensitive—and with herself for doubting yet again that it had been the right decision to exclude the daylight warriors.

As she caught Cherrytail's eye, the deputy stepped forward. "That's all in the past," he mewed. "Tonight's the Gathering, and it's time we were off." He waved his tail and stood back for Poppystar to lead the way up the trail that led to the Skyrock.

I shouldn't worry so much, Poppystar told herself as she took her place at the head of her Clan. *Harleymoon and Amber probably just feel left out. And that might not be a bad thing, if it makes them better warriors.*

The moon cast soft silver light onto the cliffs, turning everything gray, as the cats of Skyclan reached the Skyrock. Poppystar felt her paws tingle when she jumped across the gap from the edge of the cliff to the ledge that jutted out over the gorge. This was the place where Sandstar had shown Starclan to her, and where she had received her nine lives from the spirits of those long ago cats.

Wind whispered over the surface of the rock as more cats joined her. Now that Skyclan had grown so big, there was only room for the senior warriors. The newly made warriors, Sparrowpelt, Rockshade, and Bouncefire, sat closest to the edge on top of the cliff, with Nettlepaw and Birdpaw just behind them. The daylight warriors sat a tail-length or so away, as did the visitors; Poppystar noticed with a pang of uneasiness that the three groups of cats were keeping themselves separate, even though there didn't seem to be

any outward hostility among them.

Patchfoot, Waspwhisker, and her kits sat on a pile of curved stones at the end of the trail, a few tail-lengths from the gap. The two she-cats enclosed the wriggling kits with their tails, to make sure none of them tried to jump across. Lichenfur and Tangle joined them; the two elders had hauled themselves up the trail, complaining every paw step of the way, but Poppystar knew that neither of them would dream of missing a Gathering.

When her Clanmates had settled down, Poppystar sat in silence for a heartbeat or two, gazing up at the full moon and the stars. It was easy to imagine that the cats she had met when she received her nine lives were looking down at her now.

What do they think about the way I'm leading their Clan?

She took a deep breath and let her gaze travel around the circle of warriors. "I, Poppystar, leader of Skyclan, call upon my ancestors to look down upon these cats," she began. These Gatherings were still unfamiliar, and she was sharply aware that she was forging traditions that her Clan would follow for season after season. *I need to get it right.* "Since last we Gathered on the Skyrock, we have defended our territory against a horde of rats. Every cat fought bravely and took wounds for the sake of our Clan. I commend especially Fallowfern, who almost died in the fight, and Clovertail and Tinycloud, who were particularly vigilant in keeping watch on the rats until we were ready to attack."

The three cats she named blinked proudly at her praise; Tinycloud gave his shoulder fur a couple of embarrassed licks.

"I also need to mention Frecklepaw," Poppystar went on. On the flat part of the cliff, the apprentice jumped and gazed wide-eyed at his leader, as if he was afraid he was going to be scolded for something in front of the whole Clan. "He worked hard to help Echosong care for the wounded warriors," Poppystar went on, "and he has learned a great deal about herbs and how to treat injuries."

Could he be a medicine cat? Starclan, please give me a sign!

But there was no response from the stars, glittering icily above her head. Poppystar spotted Echosong giving the young tabby an approving nod, and Frecklepaw ducked his head in response, his eyes shining.

"Visitors have arrived in the gorge, from a Twolegplace downriver." Poppystar went on with her report. "Haze, Cory, Stumpy, and Cinder have settled down well during their stay in the Clan, and we thank them for the help they gave in fighting against the rats."

Is this the time or the place to invite them to stay with us for good? Poppystar asked herself, aware of Cherrytail's green gaze boring into her like a woodpecker attacking a tree. *No—and I'm not going to ask them what they are going to do next. I need to find a more private place for that.*

To her surprise, Haze rose to his paws and padded to the very edge of the cliff. "Thank you, Poppystar," he meowed, inclining his head formally to her. "We're all grateful for Skyclan's hospitality. We're glad that we were able to help you with the rats."

Poppystar dipped her head in reply, and the visiting cat withdrew again to sit beside his friends.

"Now," she went on, glancing once more around at her warriors, "does any cat have a question or a problem that they want to discuss?"

"I do." Patchfoot rose to her paws and stretched her neck to look over the cats sitting in front of her. "I'd like to use one of the new dens as a birthing den. I know we drove off the rats, but if they come back, or if a fox or a badger finds its way into the gorge, one of those upper dens would be much safer for young kits."

"It would be easier for them to fall out, though," Rainfur warned.

Patchfoot twitched her ears. "I know. We'd need to move the kits back into the nursery once they were strong enough to go outside."

Poppystar guessed that Patchfoot was worried that her new litter would be overwhelmed by Waspwhisker's rambunctious kits if they

were born in the nursery. *She could have a point.*

"Very well," she replied to Patchfoot. "Let's move you over there in the morning, and we'll see how it goes when your kits are born. Nettlepaw and Birdpaw, please fetch bedding for Patchfoot and make sure she's comfortable."

"We will, Poppystar," Nettlepaw called out.

"Thank you. And if all goes well, we'll make the arrangement permanent."

Patchfoot thanked her and sat down again.

Harleymoon and Amber got up and stepped up to the edge of the cliff, glancing at each other as if they weren't sure which one of them was going to speak first.

"We're glad to be back," Harleymoon meowed in a rush.

"We're looking forward to being part of Skyclan again," Amber added. "We've learned not to be so stupid."

"Good," Poppystar purred. "We're happy to welcome you back."

"I'd like to suggest something," Rainfur mewed as the two kittypets sat down again. "What about a special rat patrol, just to make sure that they don't return to that pile of stuff?"

"Good idea!" Shrewtooth agreed, flattening her ears.

A babble of comment broke out; Poppystar let it continue for a few moments before raising her tail for silence. "Cherrytail, what do you think?"

The deputy paused for a moment, his green eyes narrowed. Finally he shook his head. "I don't think it's necessary. The border patrols and hunting patrols will spot any signs of rats in the territory."

Poppystar nodded. "I think you're right. But if there *are* any fresh signs of rats," she added to Rainfur, "then we'll set up a rat patrol right away."

"Thank you, Poppystar," Rainfur replied, seeming content with that decision.

"What about that loner my patrol scented near the rubbish heap?" Sharpclaw asked. "Do we need to do anything?"

"Did the evening border patrol spot anything?" Poppystar meowed.

"We picked up the stale scent," Leafdapple, who had led the patrol, replied, "but nothing new."

"Then I don't think there's anything we can do," Poppystar decided. "Except that all patrols should keep a good lookout in that area."

She was about to draw the Gathering to a close, when Lichenfur hauled himself to his paws, shaking his rumpled pelt. "What about the bedding in our den?" he demanded. "I don't think the moss has been changed for a moon."

Poppystar spotted Nettlepaw open her jaws to protest, and Birdpaw quickly flicked his tail across her mouth. His sister glared at him, but kept quiet.

"Sorry, Lichenfur," Snookpaw called out. "I'll fetch some more as soon as I get here in the morning."

Muttering, the elder sat down again and leaned across to mew something into Tangle's ear.

When none of the other cats spoke, Poppystar rose to her paws. "We thank Starclan that our Clan is safe and thriving and that prey is plentiful. The Gathering is at an end."

She watched as her senior warriors leaped back over the gap, with Tinycloud watching Fallowfern carefully to make sure he didn't fall, and began to pad down the trail toward the camp. At last only she, Cherrytail, and Echosong were left.

"I thought that went well," Poppystar commented. "There don't seem to be any serious problems."

"For now," Cherrytail meowed, giving his chest fur a couple of

thoughtful licks. "I heard what you said about Frecklepaw," he continued. "It sounds as if you're going to make him Echosong's apprentice."

"I'm thinking about it," Poppystar responded guardedly.

Cherrytail's eyes stretched wide. "Have you got bees in your brain? You must know it's impossible."

"Why?" Echosong slid out his claws and his neck fur began to bristle; Poppystar hadn't often seen the gentle young tabby look this annoyed.

"Why do you need to ask?" Cherrytail sounded exasperated. "He's a kittypet!"

"He's a Skyclan apprentice," Echosong retorted. "And he has an exceptional talent for healing. I wish I'd learned as quickly when I first came here."

Cherrytail's tail-tip twitched. "But half the time he isn't here. I don't care how talented he is. What happens if a warrior is injured while their medicine cat is snoozing in a Twoleg nest?"

"And what happens if I'm killed before I've trained an apprentice?" Echosong hissed back. "The Clan wouldn't *have* a medicine cat."

"There are other possibilities," Cherrytail argued.

"Name one!"

Poppystar stretched out her tail to separate the two angry cats. "Echosong is right that there's no full Clan cat with any interest in healing," she meowed carefully. "Being a medicine cat demands true dedication."

"But there are kits growing up all the time," Cherrytail pointed out. "Waspwhisker's four, and Patchfoot's new litter. Maybe one of them —"

"And maybe not," Echosong snapped.

"We don't have to decide now." Poppystar realized she needed to bring this discussion to a close before either of the quarreling cats said something they would regret later. "Echosong, have you had any sign yet from Starclan about Frecklepaw?"

Echosong shook his head. "I've looked for one, Poppystar, but there's been nothing yet."

Cherrytail let out a snort of contempt. "And there won't be!"

Poppystar glared at him. "We don't know that. It's in the paws of our ancestors. And maybe this can all be resolved easily," she went on. "Frecklepaw might decide to come and live permanently in the gorge. But Echosong, you're not going to put any pressure on him."

"I wouldn't do that, Poppystar," the medicine cat promised.

"Then let's wait and see what happens. You'll let me know if you do have a sign—whatever it seems to say?"

Echosong nodded. "Of course."

Poppystar stood up and stretched each hind leg in turn. "Come on, let's get back to our dens."

The young medicine cat was the first to leave, dipping his head to Poppystar and shooting an icy glare at Cherrytail before running lightly across the Skyrock and leaping across the gap.

"Cherrytail, please don't ruffle his fur," Poppystar murmured.

"Then make sure he stays out of mine," Cherrytail retorted.

Chapter 14

Fluffy white clouds were building up above the gorge when Poppystar emerged from her den on the morning after the Gathering. The sun had not yet risen, and a stiff breeze buffeted her fur. She yawned and gave herself a quick grooming as she watched her Clanmates trot down the pathways to the Rockpile. Bounding down to join them, she found Cherrytail setting the patrols.

"I'll lead the border patrol," he announced. "Haze, Leafdapple, and Sparrowpelt, you come with me. Tinycloud, I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol, with Shrewtooth, Stumpy, and Rockshade. Cory, you lead the other hunting patrol, with—"

"Hey, Cory's not a warrior," Clovertail interrupted. "Should he be leading a patrol?"

Cherrytail gave his tail an irritable twitch. "Sorry, you're right. You lead the patrol then, Clovertail. Cory can go with you, with Bouncefire and Harleymoon."

Poppystar looked on with approval as the patrols started to move off. She liked to see her Clan like this, busy and well organized. *This is a new day; Starclan grant that all last night's tensions have vanished.*

"Are you coming, Snookpaw?" Leafdapple called, glancing back at his apprentice as Cherrytail led his patrol toward the bottom of the trail.

"Sorry, I can't," Snookpaw replied. "I promised to fetch fresh moss for Tangle and Lichenfur."

"Fine." Leafdapple nodded. "We'll do some battle practice when you get back."

"Great!" Snookpaw's tail shot straight up into the air as she clambered over the Rockpile and bounded across to the other side of the river.

Poppystar was impressed with the young cat's loyalty to the promise he made last night to the elders. *She'll make a fine warrior. I hope she decides to stay with us full time.* She watched Snookpaw creep along the narrow ledge beside the stream until he disappeared into the tunnel from where the water flowed out beneath the Rockpile. Poppystar pictured her shuffling along the tiny stone path that led to the Whispering Cave where the moss grew.

With the patrols gone, the other cats settled down to rest, eat, or share tongues. Cobaltclaw took Frecklepaw up to the training area for some practice; Poppystar spotted the apprentice casting a longing look back at Echosong's den as he padded away.

Popypstar sat beside the river, intending to give herself a more thorough grooming, but she had barely licked one shoulder clean when Lichenfur shuffled up to her.

"I might have known that pesky apprentice didn't mean what she said," the elder grumbled. "There's no sign of her, and we're still stuck with our old moss."

Poppystar blinked in surprise. "I saw Snookpaw go into the cave myself," she mewed. "Hasn't she come back yet?" Lichenfur shook his head. "I'll go and see what's keeping her."

The ledge to the Whispering Cave was wet and slippery, and Poppystar had to set her paws down carefully. Black water rushed along beside her a couple of mouse-lengths below the ledge. Cold, damp air crept into her pelt, and she shivered. At last Poppystar saw a pale light up ahead, reflecting on the surface of the river. The ledge widened out into a flat path, and she quickened her pace as she padded into the Whispering Cave.

Poppystar paused at the cave entrance to admire the secret world underneath the gorge. The walls of the cave were broken into cracks and ledges; shaggy clumps of moss hung from every surface, giving off a pale, eerie light. Reflections of the water rippled across the cave roof; the sound of the river and unseen dripping water echoed in Poppystar's ears.

This was the place where Echosong came to share tongues with his warrior ancestors. Though she was no medicine cat, Poppystar felt very close to Starclan here, as if she might hear their voices if she listened hard enough.

At the far side of the cave, Snookpaw was stretching up on her hind paws to claw down a bundle of moss. A large heap of it already lay on the cave floor beside her.

"Well done," Poppystar meowed. "That should make a fine bed for Lichenfur and Tangle."

Snookpaw jumped with surprise and dropped to all four paws. "Poppystar!" she exclaimed. "You nearly scared me out of my fur!"

"Sorry," Poppystar mewed. She decided not to tell her that Lichenfur had been complaining. "Do you want help carrying that lot out?"

"Please," Snookpaw puffed, beginning to roll the moss into two balls. "It *is* a lot, isn't it?" she added smugly.

Poppystar picked up one of the balls of moss and turned to head out of the cave, pausing to let Snookpaw go in front of her. The pale light from the cave slowly died away behind them; edging along the trail was even more difficult when their front paws were hidden by the clump of moss. Rounding the curve in the river, they drew closer to the ragged gap of daylight where the water swirled out.

Then Snookpaw's claws skidded on the slippery ledge. With a squeal of alarm she dropped her moss and toppled into the river, her paws flailing vainly for a grip on the stone. Dark water closed over her head.

"Snookpaw!" Dropping her own moss, Poppystar bounded to the spot where the apprentice had disappeared. She was in time to see her resurface a couple of tail-lengths farther downstream. Her paws churned the water and her jaws opened in a terrified wail.

"Help! Help me!"

She was already sinking again as Poppystar flung herself into the water and gripped her by the scruff before she could disappear. The

water was dark and shockingly icy. For a couple of heartbeats Poppystar was stunned into stillness and didn't know which way to swim. Then she caught sight of the light at the cave entrance. Striking out strongly with her hind legs, she reached the side of the cave, but the wall was smooth and slick with water; she couldn't pull herself up to the ledge again, especially with Snookpaw weighing her down.

Starclan help us!

All Poppystar could do was keep Snookpaw's head above the water while the current bore them along. She felt a moment's panic as they were swept out into daylight and the sun dazzled her eyes, blinding her while the water swept them in a circle. Rolled over by a wave, Poppystar lost all sense of direction. Then her head bobbed to the surface. Still with her teeth fixed in Snookpaw's scruff, she let the current swirl them toward the side of the pool. At last she was able to crawl out and collapse on the stones, with Snookpaw a sodden mound of fur beside her.

"Poppystar! Poppystar!"

Still muzzy with exhaustion, Poppystar recognized Sharpclaw's voice. She opened her eyes to see the young dark ginger tabby gazing down at her anxiously.

"Check... Snookpaw," she rasped.

As Sharpclaw bent over Snookpaw, she began struggling to sit up. Shivering with shock, she coughed up a stream of water and flopped back onto the stones again.

At least she's alive, Poppystar thought. *Thank Starclan!*

By now more cats were racing across the Rockpile, or leaping across the stepping stones a little farther downstream. Echosong was among them, pushing his way through as they crowded around.

"Keep back and let me see her," he ordered, crouching down beside the young black and white she-cat. "Poppystar, what happened?"

"She was fetching moss, and she slipped into the river," Poppystar

croaked, managing to get to her paws and give her pelt a good shake.

Echosong nodded and gently pressed Snookpaw's belly with one paw. Another stream of water gushed out of the apprentice's mouth.

"You'll be fine," Echosong told her reassuringly. "Come with me to my den. I'll give you some thyme leaves for the shock, and you can have a good sleep."

Still coughing, Snookpaw tottered to her paws. "No," she rasped. "I want to go home. Don't make me stay here."

Startled, Poppystar took a pace back. She wanted to tell her that the medicine cat would look after her just as well as her Twolegs, but she couldn't bring herself to make her stay in the gorge when she looked so miserable.

"All right," she meowed. "If you're sure you can make it that far."

"I'll go with her," Sharpclaw offered, letting Snookpaw lean against her shoulder. "I'll make sure she's okay."

"Thank you, Sharpclaw." The young dark ginger tabby warrior had been a kittypet once, and she would be familiar with the Twolegplace. "Make sure you get some rest, Snookpaw, and we'll see you again as soon as you're ready."

Snookpaw headed off with Sharpclaw, then halted and glanced back. "Thank you, Poppystar. You saved my life."

"You're welcome," Poppystar mewed gently.

She watched Sharpclaw helping Snookpaw across the Rockpile. Though she was thankful the accident had been no worse, she was still shaken. Gazing at the cats gathered around her, she announced, "From now on, no cat must go to the Whispering Cave alone—except for you, Echosong. And moss-gathering must always be supervised by a warrior."

"Good idea," Fallowfern meowed.

Rainfur nodded. "When I think about what could happen to our apprentices..." She shuddered.

Leaving her Clanmates to return to camp, Poppystar ventured back along the ledge until he found the remains of the moss that she had Snookpaw had dropped. Most of it had been washed away by the river, but Poppystar rolled up what was left and carried it across the Rockpile to the elders' den.

"What's that?" Lichenfur sniffed. "There's not enough moss there to make a bed for a tick!"

"Well, that's all you're getting for now," Poppystar retorted. "Snookpaw fell in the river fetching this. She could have died."

Lichenfur blinked. "Clumsy apprentice," she muttered. "She should watch where she's putting her paws."

Biting back an angry retort, Poppystar left him and went to find a sunny spot where she could sit and clean the river water from her pelt. She was drowsing in the sunlight when she heard excited squeaks behind her. Waspwhisker's kits were scampering over to the bottom of the trail where Cherrytail and the border patrol were climbing down.

"Leafdapple! Leafdapple!" Sandykit squealed. "Snookpaw fell in the river and she nearly drowned!"

"What?" Leafdapple leaped down the last couple of tail-lengths, his fur beginning to fluff up and his eyes were wide with horror. "Where is she?"

"It's not as bad as that." Poppystar rose to her paws and padded over to the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom. "She did fall in the river, fetching moss from the cave. But she was fine. She went home."

Leafdapple let his neck fur lie flat again, though his eyes were still full of concern. "I'll check on her later," he promised. "My Twoleg nest isn't far from hers."

"Thanks," Poppystar replied. "I'm worried about her. I wish she'd

stayed and let Echosong take a look at her."

"You can come with me to see her if you like," Leafdapple suggested.

"Me—come with you to the Twolegplace?" Poppystar felt every hair on her pelt start to prickle. "No thanks, Leafdapple. I don't feel comfortable among Twoleg nests."

"Unlike your Clanmates," Leafdapple murmured.

Poppystar didn't respond. She hadn't forgotten his report that he had seen—or *thought* he saw—Cherrytail and Haze leading a patrol in the Twolegplace. But she didn't want to hear any more of the rumors. In the end she hadn't confronted Cherrytail about it, because she knew her deputy would never do such a thing without telling her.

Leafdapple must have mistaken some kittypets for our warriors.

"What's this I hear about Snookpaw?" Cherrytail called, padding over to her with Waspwhisker's kits tumbling around his paws. "Is she all right?"

"She will be," Poppystar assured him.

"At least we have enough warriors for the rest of today's patrols." Cherrytail meowed. He hurried off, calling to Fallowfern and Rainfur as he went.

"I'd better go with him," Leafdapple meowed. "I've nothing to do, seeing that my apprentice isn't here. I'd promised to show her some fighting moves."

"Show us instead!" Waspwhisker's kits chorused, scrabbling at his fur until they nearly knocked him off his paws.

Leafdapple cast an amused glance at Poppystar. "You're not apprenticed yet," he told the kits.

"But you could help me with them if you want," Poppystar mewed. "Waspwhisker is worn out from looking after them. Besides, she

wants to help Patchfoot move into the new birthing den. We could take them off her paws for a bit."

"Yes, please!" Creekkit begged. "I can't fight better than all the others."

"Can't!" Mintkit squeaked, jumping on his littermate.

Poppystar let out a small *mrrow* of laughter as she watched the kits rolling around, battering at one another with tiny paws.

"Are they bothering you, Poppystar?" Waspwhisker puffed, bounding up with a harassed look.

"Not a bit," Poppystar replied. "Should we take them for a while? It would leave you free to help Patchfoot."

"Oh, would you?" Waspwhisker's voice was full of gratitude. "Now listen," she went on sternly to her kits. "You do exactly what Poppystar and Leafdapple tell you. I don't want to hear that you've put one whisker out of place. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Waspwhisker." The kits sat up, their fur rumpled and their eyes wide and innocent. "We'll be good."

"And hedgehogs will fly," Leafdapple whispered into Poppystar's ear.

As Waspwhisker padded off to join Patchfoot, Leafdapple rounded up the kits. "Come on. We'll go to the training area."

"Yes!" Flamekit bounced up and down with his tail waving. "Last one there's a kittypet!"

All four kits took off in a flurry of sand. When Poppystar and Leafdapple caught up to them at the training area, Creekkit was crouched in the middle of the open space. Her lips were drawn back to display tiny sharp teeth. "I'm a fox and I'm attacking the camp!" she announced.

"Stay away or I'll rip your fur off!" Sandykit responded, sliding out her claws.

"That's enough." Leafdapple strode out into the sandy space and raised his tail to block Sandykit as she hurled herself at her sister.

"Watch it, the fox will get you!" she squealed.

Leafdapple sidestepped rapidly to stop Creekkit from sinking her teeth into his hind leg.

"This is *not* a training session," Poppystar reminded the excited kits. "That won't happen until you're apprentices."

"But that's *moons* away," Creekkit muttered, disappointed. "I want to show you my battle moves."

"We'll play some games instead," Leafdapple meowed. "Let's see how good you are at climbing."

The kits bounced around him as he led the way across to the thorn tree that Cherrytail had used for his training exercises. Its lower branches were thick and strong, safe for the kits to improve their skills.

"When you climb," Leafdapple began, holding the kits back with his tail so that they didn't hurl themselves into the tree, "you need to look for paw holds. Places you can dig your claws in. You must never move until you know where you're going to put your paws next. And *always* think about how you're going to get down. That way, climbing is safe."

The kits nodded seriously as the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom finished speaking.

"Okay," Poppystar meowed. "Flamekit, let's see if you can climb up to that first branch."

The tiny pale orange tom scampered up to the tree and fixed his claws into a knot-hole, then scrabbled with his hind paws to boost himself up the trunk. Soon he sat panting on the branch. "I did it!" he exclaimed.

"Well done," Leafdapple praised him. "Sandykit, you next."

The light brown tabby she-cat climbed quickly and neatly to sit beside her brother on the branch. Mintkit followed. "I was faster than you," he boasted as he crouched on the branch next to the others.

"We're not trying to be fast; we're trying to be *safe*." Leafdapple pointed out, waving his tail for Creekkit to climb.

The little gray tabby scrambled up the trunk, but when she reached the branch she slipped and dangled down with her hind paws waving. "Help!" she squealed.

"Go on, you can pull yourself up," Poppystar encouraged her.

With a massive effort Creekkit hauled herself up and managed to fasten her hind claws into the branch. "Made it!" she gasped.

"Very good, all of you," Leafdapple meowed. "Now let's see you come down. One at a time, and *slowly*, Mintkit."

Poppystar remembered her father teaching her to climb, seasons ago in the woods. Coming down was always harder and more frightening than going up.

Leafdapple guided Creekkit down, then Flamekit and Mintkit. "Where's Sandykit?" he asked, looking around. "Did she get down already?"

A screech of terror interrupted him. Tipping her head back, Poppystar saw Sandykit perched almost at the top of the tree, all four paws clinging to the stump of a broken branch. "I'm stuck!" she wailed. "I can't get down!"

"You shouldn't be up there in the first place," Leafdapple mewed exasperatedly.

"And we should have kept a better eye on her," Poppystar added. "Okay, Sandykit, I'm coming to get you."

Muscles pumping, Poppystar raced up the tree. Sandykit was trembling when she reached her. "I'm going to fall!" she whimpered.

"No, you're not," Poppystar reassured her, touching her on one shoulder with the tip of her tail. "Look, put your hind paw just here..."

Slowly Poppystar guided the tiny she-cat down the tree. Sandykit's courage had returned by the time she reached the lowest branch, and she sprang off, landing on Leafdapple, who had stretched out to rest underneath.

Leafdapple jumped up, baring his teeth and growling with pretend fierceness. "I'll teach you to pounce on me!"

Sandykit let out a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Teach me, too!" Flamekit squealed, scrambling up the tree again and hurling himself down on Leafdapple. "I'm not scared of you!"

Leafdapple rolled his eyes at Poppystar as all four kits raced up the tree and jumped down, springing around with their tails high as he growled at them and swiped at them with his claws sheathed. Poppystar joined in, too, pretending to be asleep until some kit landed on top of her and cuffed her over the ears with tiny paws.

I haven't had so much fun in moons!

"We've got to fight these beasts!" Mintkit announced. "Flamekit, Sandykit, you attack from that side."

His littermates scampered off; Leafdapple and Poppystar found themselves surrounded with the kits creeping up on them in a kind of hunter's crouch.

"Are you scared?" Sandykit meowed.

"You should be!" Creekkit squeaked. "We're fiercer than you!"

"It's getting late," Leafdapple mewed at last. "Time to go back to camp."

A chorus of protest came from the kits.

"We're not tired," Sandykit insisted. "We want to play some more."

"I know, but Waspwhisker will be wondering where you are." Poppystar noticed that a blackbird had landed on one of the highest branches of the thorn tree. "You see that bird? Leafdapple, do you think you could catch it?"

Leafdapple looked up, his eyes narrowing. "I expect so."

"Off you go, then. Kits, this is how a Skyclan warrior hunts."

The kits watched, enthralled, as Leafdapple leaped into the tree and crept up to the higher branches, trying not to shake the one where the bird was perching. Poppystar admired his perfect balance.

He's so good at jumping and climbing. He must be a Skyclan descendant.

Leafdapple shuffled along a branch until he had enough space for a clear leap at the blackbird. At the last moment it tried to take off, but he grabbed it in his strong jaws and bounded down the tree again to drop the limp body in front of the kits.

"That was great!" Flamekit squeaked.

"I want to learn to do that," Mintkit mewed. "Show us now!"

"Another time, little ones," Poppystar promised.

"You can share," Leafdapple meowed, nudging his prey toward the kits. "Blackbird is very tasty.

The kits gathered around the fresh-kill, scrambling over one another in their eagerness.

"It's the best thing I've ever eaten!" Sandykit announced, looking up with a feather on her nose.

The sun was going down by the time the kits had finished eating.

"Come on," Poppystar meowed. "Now we really do have to go back to camp."

"Don't wanna..." Mintkit protested, his words punctuated by a massive yawn. "Wanna climb some more..."

"The only place you're going to climb is into your nest," Leafdapple told him, rounding up the littermates with a sweep of his tail. "Let's go."

The kits were stumbling from tiredness as they followed Poppystar back to the Rockpile, where Waspwhisker was waiting.

"Thank you so much!" the gray and white she-cat exclaimed. "Have they behaved themselves?"

"They've been fine," Leafdapple assured her.

"Good. We've made Patchfoot really comfortable in the new birthing den. It won't be long before her kits come."

"Can we play with them?" Sandykit asked, her voice muzzy with sleep.

"Not at first," her mother warned. "They'll be too little. Now say 'thank you' to Poppystar and Leafdapple for looking after you."

"Thank you!" the kits chorused.

"Can we do it again tomorrow?" Mintkit pleaded.

"We'll see," Poppystar purred. "Go with your mother now. I don't know how Waspwhisker manages all four of them," she added to Leafdapple as she watched the she-cat herding her litter up the trail toward the nursery. "I'm worn out!"

"Me too," Leafdapple agreed. "But they're great kits. I enjoyed playing with them."

"You'd better go home now and check on Snookpaw," Poppystar mewed. "Tell her to get well soon. We're all missing her."

"I'll do that." Leafdapple whisked his tail lightly over Poppystar's flank, then headed up the trail that led to the top of the gorge.

Even though Poppystar had said she was worn out, the session with the kits had left her feeling playful. Her paws tingled with energy. Part of her wanted to race along the top of the cliff, feeling the

wind in her fur, or roll in crackly leaves under the trees.

You're not a kit anymore! she scolded herself. *Better settle for a juicy piece of fresh-kill instead.*

Her heart lighter than it had been for many days, she padded off to join her Clanmates as they ate.

Chapter 15

Poppystar brushed through the dew-laden grass, pausing to glance over her shoulder at the rest of the border patrol. "Cory, try to keep up," she called. "I know the rats are gone, but it's not a good idea to get separated around here."

"Sorry." The Twolegplace cat plodded up to stand beside Rainfur. Trying to muffle a yawn, he added, "I can't get used to these early mornings."

"You will, sooner or later," Rainfur promised.

Poppystar gave him a nod and carried on. Above the trees the sky was pale and clear, promising hot sunshine later. The only sound was the swish of grass and the soft rustling of branches.

As they approached the clearing where they had fought the rats, Poppystar halted and stretched her jaws wide to taste the air, almost gagging on the rotting scents from the heap of Twoleg waste. But the traces of rats were faint and stale; they hadn't returned.

"I can smell another cat," she mewed after a moment. "Sharpclaw, is that the loner you told us about?"

The fourth member of the patrol tasted the air. "That's her," she confirmed. "Fresh, too. She's been here again."

Poppystar tracked the scent for a few paw steps. It led across the border in the direction of the Twolegplace, though she didn't think it had been left by any kittypet. The scent was too green and sharp for that, not muffled by Twoleg smells.

"Do you want us to follow it?" Sharpclaw asked, her paws working in the grass.

Poppystar thought for a couple of heartbeats. "It doesn't seem worth it," she meowed. "It's the only scent here, so the loner hasn't been stealing prey. But I'll make sure all the Clan knows to keep a lookout."

Was that the right decision? she wondered as she led the patrol back through the trees. *What would Sandstar have done?*

At the top of the gorge, Poppystar was pleased to spot Leafdapple on the trail ahead of her, though her pleasure faded when she realized that his apprentice wasn't with him. She quickened her pace and caught up to the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom as he reached the bottom of the ravine. "Hi. What happened to Snookpaw? Is she okay?"

Leafdapple turned at the sound of her voice; his amber eyes showed that he shared her concern. "I don't know. I went to her nest, but I couldn't find her, and she didn't answer when I called out to her. I think her Twolegs must have shut her inside."

Uneasiness stirred within Poppystar. Snookpaw had never found it hard to get out before. "Maybe she's still tired after yesterday," she began. "We'll have to—"

She broke off at the sound of excited squealing as Waspwhisker's kits swarmed around them.

"Leafdapple!" Mintkit squeaked. "We've been waiting for you. Play with us again!"

"Yes, be that giant beast," Sandykit urged. "Poppystar, you too. You were scary!"

"You'll have to wait," Leafdapple told them. "You were very lucky to have your Clan leader all to yourselves yesterday."

Poppystar twitched her whiskers with amusement. "Maybe later, kits," she meowed. "I've got to check the patrols now."

As she was speaking, Waspwhisker bounded up, looking flustered. "Are you bothering Poppystar and Leafdapple again?" she asked her kits. "Come with me right away. You haven't even been groomed

this morning!"

With an apologetic glance at Poppystar, she hustled the kits off to a flat stone near the water's edge and started to groom Flamekit with firm strokes of her tongue.

"Leafdapple, are you ready for a hunting patrol?" Cherrytail meowed, padding up with Haze and Tinycloud. When the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom nodded, he waved his tail to where Fallowfern was waiting with his apprentice, Nettlepaw, and Sparrowpelt and Amber. "Over there."

Leafdapple dipped his head to Poppystar and padded over to join the patrol, who headed downstream with Fallowfern in the lead. Cherrytail gathered his own patrol, beckoning with his tail to Cinder, who was washing his paws near the fresh-kill pile.

"I thought we'd try the woods near the rat heap," he meowed to Poppystar.

"Good idea." Poppystar replied. "You can keep an eye open for that loner. My border patrol scented her again today."

"Will do." Cherrytail gave her a brisk nod and led his patrol up the trail.

With her Clanmates organized for the day, there was little for Poppystar to do, but she felt too energetic to sit and drowse in the sun. *I think I'll go and see how the prey is running,* she decided. *I haven't hunted alone for at least a moon.*

But as Poppystar climbed the trail, she found Stumpy outside the warriors' den with her paws tucked under her and her eyes fixed on the distance. She jumped when Poppystar's shadow fell across her.

"You startled me," she mewed. "I was... thinking of something else, I guess. Were you looking for one of the warriors? I think they're all out hunting."

"No, I'm just off hunting myself."

Stumpy hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Would you mind if I

came with you?"

"Not at all." Poppystar tried to hide her surprise. Stumpy was the most reserved of the visitors, keeping her thoughts to herself, although she was always polite and joined in with Clan activities when she was asked to.

The brown tabby she-cat fell in behind Poppystar as they climbed to the top of the cliff, then padded beside her as they headed deeper into the woods.

"This must be different from hunting in the Twolegplace," Poppystar remarked. "Are there any trees there?"

"A few," Stumpy responded. "Trees and bushes, in Twoleg gardens."

"What kind of prey do you hunt?"

"Birds, mostly."

Poppystar pressed on, determined to make some sort of conversation. "Haze says you eat rats."

Stumpy nodded. "They don't taste that good, but they're food."

Poppystar gave up. The two she-cats padded on in silence until Poppystar heard the flutter of wings above her head and caught the scent of thrush. Looking up, she spotted the bird sitting on a low branch in a nearby tree.

If I try to climb the tree, it'll see me before I get close...

Signaling with her tail for Stumpy to stay where she was, Poppystar crept through the long grass until she reached the next tree, a beech whose branches interlaced with the ash where the thrush was perching. Bunching her muscles, she jumped and clawed her way up the trunk until she reached a spot where she could look down on her prey. As lightly as she could, imagining she was stalking a mouse, she crept along a branch of the beech tree until she was a tail-length above the thrush.

Suddenly the bird realized it was being hunted. As it spread its

wings, Poppystar let herself drop down with her front paws outstretched. The thrush tried to fly away, but Poppystar snagged her claws into one of its wings before it was fully spread. The bird fluttered in panic, its free wing beating frantically. Poppystar sprang on top of it and took its life with a bite to the throat.

"That was impressive!" Stumpy commented as Poppystar leaped down to the ground with her fresh-kill in her jaws.

"It's not that hard," Poppystar meowed. "I could teach you if you like, for when you're next on hunting patrol."

"Thanks, but I don't think it's worth it," Stumpy replied.

"What?" Shock prickled through Poppystar's pelt. "Are you thinking of leaving?"

Stumpy didn't meet her gaze, just lowered her head to give her chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks.

She said something she wasn't supposed to, Poppystar guessed.

"I... er... I'm not sure. It's not up to me," Stumpy mumbled.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want, you know," Poppystar told her impulsively. A little startled at herself, she realized that was true. The newcomers fit well into Clan life, and the gorge seemed happier and busier now. "Was there... was there some trouble that made you leave your Twolegplace? Are you waiting for something to happen before you can go back?"

Stumpy blinked, looking almost panic-stricken. "Well, we—" she began awkwardly, then broke off. "Look! A mouse!"

Poppystar hadn't seen the prey, and wondered for a heartbeat whether Stumpy had invented it. Then she spotted the little brown creature nibbling on a seed underneath the roots of an oak tree.

Stumpy ran toward it without thinking about whether the mouse would sense her paw steps. The mouse heard the crack as she stepped on a dry twig, so it darted away, but Stumpy picked up speed and slammed one paw down on it before it could escape.

"Well done," Poppystar mewed as the visiting she-cat carried her prey back. *If I caught an apprentice hunting like that, I'd wonder what their mentor had been teaching them!* "You might want to watch where you're putting your paws," she added tactfully. "Then you won't tread on twigs or dead leaves. And keep your tail still so that you don't brush against crackly undergrowth."

"Thanks, Poppystar," Stumpy panted, dropping the mouse beside Poppystar's thrush. "There's so much to remember!"

"Well, you might as well learn it, even if you're not here long enough to hunt in the trees," Poppystar meowed. "You never know, the skills might be useful in your Twolegplace."

"I'm sure they will," Stumpy answered, with a warmth in her voice that hadn't been there before.

I could be friends with this cat, Poppystar realized. *I hope she stays.*

As she was scratching earth over their prey to hide it until they were ready to collect it, she noticed a squirrel crossing a patch of open ground a few fox-lengths farther into the wood. It paused at the foot of an ivy-covered tree and scuffled around in the debris between the roots. Poppystar touched Stumpy lightly on the shoulder with her tail-tip and angled her ears toward the prey.

"Can we catch it?" Stumpy whispered. "It'll climb the tree."

"Let it," Poppystar murmured. "I'm going to climb the tree first, then you chase the squirrel so it runs straight up into my claws."

Stumpy's eyes shone. "Right!"

Poppystar approached the tree in a wide half-circle so that she didn't alert the squirrel. She clawed her way up the trunk on the far side, and crouched on a fork in the trunk in the middle of a clump of ivy. The squirrel was still scuffling among the roots below. Poppystar waved her tail to show Stumpy she was in position. The brown tabby she-cat let out a fearsome screech and pelted toward the tree. The squirrel looked up, froze for a moment in terror, then raced up the trunk.

Poppystar scrambled out of the concealing ivy, her lips drawn back in a snarl. The squirrel let out a squeal of panic and made for the ground again. But Stumpy was ready for it. Poppystar watched as the she-cat sprang on the squirrel and raked her claws across its throat. It twitched once and then went limp.

Poppystar jumped down to the ground and padded up to Stumpy, who was standing proudly over her prey. "Great catch!"

"It was yours, really," Stumpy replied.

"No, it was both of us," Poppystar told her. "We worked well together."

Stumpy was even quieter as they returned to camp, laden with fresh-kill. Poppystar hoped she was reconsidering what she had said about leaving.

I need to find out what's going on. What is it that Haze and his friends want from us?

Dropping her prey on the fresh-kill pile, Poppystar heard voices raised in anger. She turned and spotted Cobaltclaw and his apprentice, Frecklepaw, standing at the edge of the pool, facing each other with their fur fluffed out and their eyes blazing. Both toms were normally so even tempered that Poppystar padded over to find out what was going on.

"I don't come to the gorge to sit around grooming my tail while I wait for you!" Cobaltclaw hissed. "You missed a whole training session!"

"I was busy!" Frecklepaw retorted. "Echosong needed me to go fetch herbs because Flamekit had a pain in his belly."

"That's not your responsibility," Cobaltclaw lashed his tail. "Echosong isn't your mentor."

"I wish he was!" Frecklepaw flashed back.

Before Cobaltclaw could reply, Poppystar stepped forward. "Frecklepaw, you *never* speak to your mentor like that," she scolded. "You need to be respectful to Cobaltclaw. Apologize at once."

Frecklepaw's eyes widened with dismay as he realized that his Clan leader had heard the quarrel. "Sorry, Cobaltclaw," he muttered.

Cobaltclaw gave him a curt nod, his neck fur beginning to lie flat again.

"In the future," Poppystar went on, "you must check with Cobaltclaw before you do anything for Echosong."

"But—" Frecklepaw opened his jaws to protest, then clearly thought better of it. "All right, Poppystar, I will."

"Good. Cobaltclaw, there's still time for some training before you and Frecklepaw have to go home."

"Right." Cobaltclaw summoned his apprentice with a twitch of his tail, and stalked off toward the training area.

Frecklepaw followed, his head down and his paws dragging.

When the two toms had gone, Poppystar headed for Echosong's den, but the medicine cat emerged before she reached it, meeting her at the entrance.

"I heard that," Echosong meowed. "I'm sorry, Poppystar. I didn't know Cobaltclaw was waiting for Frecklepaw."

"That's not the point," Poppystar began, thinking Echosong didn't sound all that sorry. "You shouldn't give tasks to an apprentice unless you ask their mentor first."

"But I do think Cobaltclaw was too harsh on Frecklepaw," Echosong went on, as if Poppystar hadn't spoken. "Anyone would think he'd done something really wrong."

Poppystar bit back an irritated comment; Echosong clearly wasn't getting it. "You have to remember that Frecklepaw is here to be a warrior," she reminded the medicine cat.

"I thought he was here to be a member of Skyclan," Echosong retorted.

Poppystar's belly churned with tension. *I don't want to quarrel with Echosong!* To her relief, she spotted Cherrytail returning down the trail with his patrol: Haze, Cory, and Tinycloud. As he saw Poppystar he called her name and quickened his pace.

"We'll talk about this again later," Poppystar muttered to Echosong, and bounded off toward her deputy, meeting him at the bottom of the trail.

"Is everything okay?"

"Fine," Cherrytail replied.

He didn't tell Poppystar where they had been, and they weren't carrying any prey. *But they went out to hunt,* Poppystar thought uneasily.

As Cherrytail padded closer to her she caught a whiff of a Thunderpath, and her pelt prickled. *Have they been to the Twolegplace?*

She almost asked Cherrytail straight out, then shook her head. There was no need to interrogate her deputy; if Cherrytail had been there, he would tell her.

Almost as if he had picked up her thought, Cherrytail murmured, "May I have a word in private? Maybe up there?"

Without waiting for a reply he turned back to the trail and started to climb. Poppystar followed, her belly lurching with apprehension. *Is he going to tell me about some sort of trouble in the Twolegplace?*

"What's all this about?" she prompted as they reached the cliff top.

Cherrytail stood looking down into the gorge, his expression thoughtful. "It's about the visitors," he meowed. "I'd like them to be made full warriors of Skyclan."

Poppystar wasn't surprised by the request. Her deputy had

obviously been thinking along those lines for some time now. "Is that what they want?" she asked.

"I haven't asked them," Cherrytail admitted, "but they must. They carry out all the warrior duties, and they never talk about leaving."

Oh, no? Poppystar remembered her conversation with Stumpy earlier that day. The brown tabby she-cat obviously didn't believe that the visitors were going to stay permanently. But what she had said was so vague that Poppystar didn't feel she could tell Cherrytail about it.

Standing beside Cherrytail and looking down into the camp, Poppystar watched Haze and Cinder settle down to eat near the fresh-kill pile with Tinycloud and Sharpclaw. Cory was playing some sort of game with the apprentices, trying to jump on one another's tail, while Stumpy sat outside Echosong's den talking to the medicine cat. No cat who looked at them would think they were any different from the rest of the Clan.

I didn't want Stumpy to tell me they were going to leave, Poppystar remembered. *This would be a good way of making them part of Skyclan for good.*

"You're right," she meowed to Cherrytail. "It's time we honored them by making them warriors."

Cherrytail's eyes glowed with approval. "I'm glad you agree. Would you like me to talk to Haze about it?"

"I don't think that's necessary, do you? It's a huge honor we're giving them, and I want the entire Clan there to witness it. It might not make them stay, but how else can we thank them?"

For a moment Cherrytail didn't reply; then he gave a brisk nod. "Right. When do you want to do it?"

Poppystar stretched out her front paws and flattened her back, feeling the tension ease from the muscles in her shoulders. "I think now would be a good time."

With Cherrytail following her, Poppystar padded down into the

gorge. Glancing around, she saw Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw returning from their battle training. She was glad to notice that even though their session had been short, they looked more at ease with each other. Rainfur and Birdpaw followed close behind them. Sharpclaw, Amber, and Clovertail were getting ready to go on the final border patrol of the day. Echosong and Stumpy still sat outside the medicine cat's den. Cory had joined Haze and Cinder near the fresh-kill pile. The two elders were sunning themselves beside the river in the last of the sunlight, while Waspwhisker was rounding up her kits, ready to return to the nursery. There was no sign of Leafdapple; Poppystar guessed that he had gone back to the Twolegplcae to check on Snookpaw.

Bunching her muscles, Poppystar bounded up to the top of the Rockpile. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting!"

The cats in the gorge looked up at her in surprise. Nettlepaw shot out of the apprentices' den and scrambled down to join her fellow apprentices. Shrewtooth popped her head out of the warriors' den, staring wide-eyed as if she expected to see a horde of attacking badgers charging down the gorge. Fallowfern followed her out, giving her a shove from behind to get her started down the trail.

Rockshade, Bouncefire, and Sparrowpelt all appeared at a run from somewhere downstream; Sparrowpelt had a vole in her jaws, which she tossed onto the fresh-kill pile before sitting down with her sisters. Patchfoot poked her head out of the new birthing den, but stayed where she was.

"This is an important time in the life of a Clan, the naming of new warriors," Poppystar announced.

She saw Nettlepaw and Birdpaw give each other a startled look; then Nettlepaw shook her head and shrugged. The apprentices couldn't possibly think it was their turn yet, but clearly no cat expected Poppystar to name the visitors.

"Haze, Cinder, Stumpy, and Cory, come forward, please."

A murmur of surprise passed through the Clan as the four cats

padded hesitantly forward to stand below the Rockpile. They looked puzzled—but only Stumpy looked wary, as if she was worried that Poppystar was going to say something about their plans to leave.

Poppystar steadied her paws on the warm stone. "Though these cats were not born and brought up in a Clan, they know the skills they need as warriors and they are ready to become full members of Skyclan." She gazed up at the sky, reddening with the streaks of sunset. "I, Poppystar, leader of Skyclan, call upon—"

"Hang on," Haze interrupted. "You're making us warriors?"

There was a gasp from more than one cat behind him. No cat interrupted a warrior ceremony, least of all one of the cats who was being named!

"Yes—yes I am," Poppystar stammered, suddenly afraid that he was going to refuse. She gazed down at Haze, trying to read his reaction in his face, but he was completely closed to her. *I don't know this cat at all,* she realized with something like panic.

Catching Cherrytail's gaze, Poppystar figured her deputy looked as alarmed and unsettled as she felt. *You were right. I should have let you talk to Haze first.*

The visiting cats had drawn together into a huddle, meowing quietly to one another. They kept casting swift glances at Poppystar. Finally they broke apart and faced her.

"That's okay," Haze mewed. "You can go ahead."

He and his companions looked interested, and mildly pleased, but they obviously had no idea what the ceremony represented. *They're not Clan cats,* Poppystar realized. *This isn't an honor for them.*

It was too late to back down. Taking a deep breath, Poppystar continued. "I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these four cats. In the time they have spent with us they have come to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors."

Jumping down to stand in front of them, she meowed, "Haze, Stumpy, Cinder, and Cory, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your own lives?"

"I do," all four cats replied.

Was Stumpy a bit hesitant there? Poppystar wondered. *Or am I imagining things?*

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior names," she continued. "Haze, from this moment—"

Haze raised his tail. "Wait."

"Yes?" Poppystar asked, trying not to sound impatient. *That's the second time he's interrupted. They really don't understand what this ceremony means.*

"We'll keep our own names," Haze meowed.

Poppystar stared at him. Was this something Starclan would allow? Even the kittypet warriors had taken warrior names, more or less.

"We don't feel the need to change who we are by name," Cinder explained. "We haven't acted differently by becoming part of the Clan."

Poppystar could see the point of that, and she spotted Cherrytail nodding as if he agreed. "Very well," she mewed, rapidly revising the words with which she would conclude the warrior ceremony. "Starclan honors your courage and skill, and we welcome you as—"

"What's going on?" The outraged yowl came from behind Poppystar. She turned to see Harleymoon pelting down the gorge from the direction of the training area. She skidded to a halt beside her.

"Why are you making them warriors?" she demanded.

Chapter 16

Author's Note: I can't believe I have to say this, but please refrain from commenting anything about homophobia, racial slurs, or pedophilia. The comments will be deleted by me. These things are not tolerated on this account as this is a safe space for everyone. Thank you :)

Every cat turned to gaze at the kittypet. Harleymoon's eyes were glaring and her fur was fluffed up in anger so that she looked twice her size. "Well, why are you?" she repeated.

"I don't know," Tinycloud replied with biting sarcasm. "Could it be because they're brave and loyal and good at hunting, or is that just crazy?"

"But they haven't had any proper training," Cobaltclaw pointed out.

"They didn't need any," Clovertail retorted.

Frecklepaw eased himself closer to his mentor, backing him up. "I bet they don't even know the warrior code!"

"And what about apprentice tasks?" Birdpaw chipped in with a mutinous look on his face. "*We* all have to do them!"

Poppystar raised her tail for silence. She was furious with Harleymoon for breaking into the ceremony, and disturbed that other cats were backing her up, when they had kept their opinions to themselves until now. But with a pang of guilt she had to admit that there was some truth in what they said.

"There's no need for fur to be ruffled over this," she meowed. "Cherrytail and I believe that this is the best way to acknowledge all that the visitors have done for Skyclan. They have learned our skills, and taught us skills we never knew before. How could we treat them as apprentices? However," she added, forestalling

another protest from Harleymoon, "I'm sure they won't mind helping with the apprentice tasks so that they experience every part of Clan life."

The visitors glanced at one another, as if they weren't so sure about that.

"If it's all too much trouble..." Stumpy murmured.

"This is my decision!" Poppystar raised her head and stared out across her Clan. No cat was going to bully her out of finishing the ceremony. She felt Cherrytail's green gaze fixed on her, and saw him give her a tiny nod of approval.

"Haze, Starclan honors your courage and skill," she went on, "and we welcome you as a full member of Skyclan." She rested her muzzle on Haze's head, and after a moment's hesitation Haze licked her shoulder and moved back to stand beside Tinycloud.

In the same way Poppystar made the other three Twolegplace cats full members of Skyclan. She felt flustered; the ceremony didn't seem right without giving the cats warrior names.

"Haze! Stumpy! Cinder! Cory!"

At the end of the ceremony some of the Skyclan cats called out the names of the new warriors, but others, Poppystar noticed, kept silent. Harleymoon, of course, who had turned her back and refused to watch the ceremony. Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw, Amber and Birdpaw... *I'll need to keep an eye on them, and make sure they don't create trouble.* Sparrowpelt was quiet, too, Poppystar noticed with a sinking feeling in her belly. *And Lichenfur, Fallowfern, and Patchfoot. Great Starclan! Please don't let this split the Clan.*

When the voices had died away, Haze stepped forward again and inclined his head formally to Poppystar. "I thank you on behalf of all four of us," he meowed. "I'm sure we have much to learn from one another."

"Yes, I'm sure we do," Poppystar responded.

But she still felt uneasy. It hadn't been a proper ceremony, and she

was sure there were things about the Clan's four newest warriors that were being hidden from her.

And I have to say something to Harleymoon about the way she disrupted the ceremony, she thought, anger still tingling through her pelt. *But what?*

The kittypet was already on her way out of the gorge, followed by Amber, Cobaltclaw, and Frecklepaw. They hadn't even waited to say goodbye.

The rest of the Clan gathered around the fresh-kill pile to feast and celebrate the newest warriors.

"Don't forget you have to keep vigil tonight and guard the camp," Cherrytail reminded them.

"Don't worry," Cory replied. "If any rats come, they won't get a whisker past us!"

Poppystar didn't feel comfortable joining in. She chose a sparrow from the pile, picked at it moodily for a few heartbeats, then headed for her den.

"Are you okay?" Echosong asked as Poppystar padded past him.

"Fine." Poppystar replied shortly, unable to forget the frost that had formed between them over Frecklepaw's apprenticeship. As she stalked on toward her den she was aware of the medicine cat's gaze still following her.

Poppystar was troubled as she lay down in her den. Was it really the destiny of these cats to join Skyclan? *Surely we need as many members as possible, to grow strong?*

She remembered the prophecy from the brown tabby she-cat she had seen in her dream. "Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive." And she remembered her other dream, of the terrifying flood that had uprooted the trees in the gorge and swept her cats away to drown helplessly in the torrent.

Have I created roots? she asked herself. *Or is this just another storm?*

Worn out with worrying, she closed her eyes, and instantly found herself in the flat, grassy area on top of the gorge. The stars of Silverpelt blazed down on her, but barely a twinkle came from the Twolegplace; it seemed to be much farther away than usual. Everything was still; there wasn't even a breeze to stir the grass.

Movement at the edge of the forest caught Poppystar's eye as a cat emerged from the trees: a light brown tabby tom. Stars twinkled like frost in his fur and around his paws as he paced toward Poppystar.

"Birdstar!" she whispered.

The former Skyclan leader gazed at her from amber eyes that shone like tiny moons. "Poppystar," he acknowledged her, dipping his head. "It's good to see you here."

"I'm glad to be here, Birdstar," Poppystar caught her breath as she saw more cats approaching from every side. She recognized Spottedleaf and padded up to meet him, drinking in his sweet scent.

"Greetings, Spottedleaf," she meowed. The tom blinked at her.

Poppystar felt strangely calm as the star-furred warriors thronged around her. Except for Spottedleaf and Birdstar, none of them seemed to realize that she was there; instead they wove among themselves, greeting one another—sometimes warily, sometimes with friendly warmth—and occasionally paused to dole out a lick on another cat's ear, or to trail their tail-tip along a sleek flank. Poppystar watched Birdstar's mate, Cloudstorm, touching noses with her two children, and her heart jumped when she spotted Petalnose, the very pale gray tom who had died in the first battle against the rats, on the far side of the crowd.

Spottedleaf stood beside her, so close that their pelts were brushing, and waved his tail toward three cats just padding up to join their Clanmates in Starclan. In the lead was a dignified she-cat, her dense reddish-brown fur shimmering with starlight. Her eyes were the brilliant amber of a greenleaf sunset. Behind her came a graceful

dark gray and white she-cat with spiky fur, and a powerful pale gray tabby tom with darker flecks.

"This is Oakstar," Spottedleaf mewed, angling his ears toward the first cat. "She was the leader of Thunderclan when Sandstar first came to the forest."

Poppystar bowed her head in respect. *So this is the cat who made Sandstar a warrior!* "Sandstar told me she was a great leader," she murmured.

"And this is Oakstar's sister, Thistleclaw," Spottedleaf continued, "and Thistleclaw's son, Brindleface. He was once Sandstar's deputy."

Poppystar blinked, humbled that these warriors would make their way to see her form such distant skies. "You are all welcome here," she meowed.

A stir in the air behind her made her look around. She felt a shiver run through her pelt, light as a mouse's paws, when she spotted the brown she-cat who had spoken the prophecy in her dream. The bigger cat, the dark brown tabby she-cat who had been with her, was beside her, the two cats standing a little way apart as they watched the other assembling.

Poppystar wondered if she dared go across and speak to them, when she heard a voice behind her.

"Greetings, Poppystar."

She turned to see a beautiful gray she-cat with piercing blue eyes standing in front of her, and recognized Skywatcher. Poppystar felt warmed from ears to tail-tip to see her looking tall, strong, thick-pelted once more.

"It's good to see you, Skywatcher," she purred. "Why are you all here? I've seen Starclan warriors in dreams before, but never so many of you."

"It's been a long time since Starclan came together like this," Skywatcher replied. "And it's because of you. You and your Clanmates, who have forged a new Clan with the courage and the

honor that would make any warrior proud to be part of it. All five Clans have gathered to celebrate Skyclan's survival."

Amazement and disbelief flooded through Poppystar as she gazed at the starlit warriors. *We did this? My Clan?*

"We won't always be in the same place like this," Skywatcher warned, as if she guessed she was about to question what was happening. "Our Clans are in different places, and the skies are not always open to use. So let us enjoy the moment while we can."

"Yes—oh, yes!" Poppystar breathed out, feeling that happiness was about to well up inside her and spill over like rain from an upturned lead. She felt as if she could stand there forever, basking in the whispering, starlit warmth.

"Let's hunt!" one cat yowled.

Immediately the cats of Starclan gathered and shifted like a shoal of glittering fish before flowing smoothly toward the forest, their belly fur brushing the grass and their tails streaming out behind them. Poppystar was swept along with them. Energy crackled through her like a bolt of lightning.

There's nothing better than this! Being among warriors, running through the trees, searching for prey...

She basked in the strength and speed and skill she could feel sparking in her legs. She had lost sight of the cat who had made the prophecy, and her Clanmate, but Spottedleaf raced briefly at her side. "Seize the moment!" he urged. The glow in his eyes told Poppystar that the words had special meaning for her. "Destiny will arrive, whether we seek it or not."

Poppystar felt comforted, the worries of her waking life melting away like icicles in the sun. These cats seemed to be telling her to celebrate being part of the Clan as it was now, that the future was hidden and they must live in the present.

But she wished she had been able to talk to the cat she had dreamed of at the bottom of the gorge.

Skywatcher and Spottedleaf said nothing about storms lying ahead. Does that mean the storm will never come?

Poppystar wasn't ready to discount the prophecy, yet the visit tonight had reassured her. She knew that her Clan had to be prepared, with training and battle practice, but that was all they could do. As her paws flew over the shining grass of the dream forest, Poppystar knew she must not try to see the future that was hidden from her.

Chapter 17

Paw steps on the rock outside her den woke Poppystar. Blinking in the sunlight, she made out Leafdapple's head and shoulders as he looked in. Anxiety flooded through her as she realized how late she had slept.

"I'm sorry, Poppystar!" Leafdapple exclaimed, his forepaws scrabbling at the floor of the den in embarrassment. "I didn't realize you were still asleep."

"It's okay," Poppystar mumbled around a huge yawn. She sat up, wincing at the ache in her muscles. *Any cat would think I had been racing through the forest all last night!* "Come in."

She felt embarrassed as Leafdapple as she shook moss out of her pelt and tried to give herself a quick grooming. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I'm worried about Snookpaw," Leafdapple meowed, sitting in the entrance to the den. "She's still shut up in her housefolk's nest. I'd like to make sure that she's okay, and that they're not keeping her there against her will."

Every hair on Poppystar's pelt prickled, and she stopped washing to face the daylight warrior. "That's not good," she commented. "You're right, you should do everything you can to find out what's going on."

Leafdapple looked down, examining his paws. "Actually, I was hoping you would come with me."

Poppystar's heart began to beat faster with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. "I don't belong in the Twolegplace!"

"I'd look after you," Leafdapple assured her. "And I know exactly where we're going."

Poppystar, you're being a fox-heart! Poppystar told herself, remembering her dream of the night before. The joy she had felt then in being a cat, the energy that had flowed through her body as she hunted with the warriors of Starclan, gave courage to her heart and paws.

"All right," she mewed. "I'll come. I'll just let Cherrytail know."

Down in the gorge, Cherrytail was organizing the hunting patrols. "Cory, you lead this one, with Clovertail, Rainfur, and Birdpaw," he ordered. "Haze, you can lead the other; take Cobaltclaw, Frecklepaw, and Sharpclaw."

Poppystar couldn't help noticing that Cobaltclaw flicked her tail with annoyance as he fell in behind Haze, while Birdpaw padded up to his mother and muttered into her ear, "I don't want to take orders from *him*!" with a glare at Cory.

Starclan, please let them get used to it in a few days.

Cherrytail blinked in surprise when Poppystar told him she was going to the Twolegplace with Leafdapple. "You'll need to take care," he meowed. "And listen, about Leafdapple—"

"What?" Poppystar interrupted sharply.

Cherrytail hesitated, then gave his fur a shake. "Nothing. Don't worry, Poppystar. I'll look after everything here."

Poppystar watched him closely to see if he gave any flicker of knowing more about Twolegplace than he should—she hadn't forgotten about Leafdapple's accusation of Cherrytail's secret night patrols—but her deputy's gaze showed nothing but concern for her, and confidence that he could take care of the Clan while she was gone. With a sigh, Poppystar pushed Leafdapple's report to the back of her mind. He was the very last cat she could imagine lying to her, but she couldn't believe that Cherrytail would keep anything from her that threatened the safety of their Clan.

A stiff breeze was blowing, flattening the grass, as Poppystar rejoined Leafdapple and they climbed to the top of the gorge. The

sun shone brightly from a clear blue sky with only a few wisps of cloud. Poppystar was cast back into her dream, and the starlit cats who had surrounded her the night before seemed to be there once more, scenting the air with the history of countless moons; the memory was to vivid that she was surprised to realize that only Leafdapple was running beside her.

He slowed down as they crossed the border and drew closer to Twolegplace. "We'll have to cross a Thunderpath soon," he told her. "They can be pretty scary, but it should be quiet at this time of day. And just beyond that there's a Twoleg nest with a dog that barks its stupid head off every time I go past. But you don't need to worry; it can't get at us. Then there's another Thunderpath, and after that we have to crawl underneath some really thick shrubs—"

"I'm sure we'll be fine, Leafdapple," Poppystar interrupted.

But her confidence began to ebb away as they crossed the Thunderpath, with anxious glances at a sleeping monster a few fox-lengths away. *What if it wakes up?* she wondered, ready to flee if it let out a roar and leaped toward her.

Leafdapple led her along a fence; she could smell the dog on the other side and her heart thumped at the sound of its high-pitched yapping, but Leafdapple was right; the dog scrabbled frantically against the fence, but it couldn't get through to attack them. They crossed the second Thunderpath; the black surface felt sticky under Poppystar's paws, and she wrinkled her nose at the acrid scent. Then she followed Leafdapple through a gap in a fence and emerged in a tangle of thick bushes. They squirmed underneath the lowest branches, their belly fur brushing the soft, moist earth.

Leafdapple raised a paw to halt Poppystar as they emerged from the shrubs. A stretch of smooth Twoleg grass separated them from the nest. On the far side a couple of Twoleg kits were tossing something round and brightly colored between them, squealing happily as they jumped up to catch it.

"What are they doing?" Poppystar whispered.

Leafdapple shrugged. "They call that thing a ball. I think it's for

some sort of apprentice training exercise. Sometimes my housefolk throw one for me to chase."

"And do you chase it?" Poppystar asked.

Leafdapple gave his chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. "It's good fun, actually. And it's practice for hunting."

Poppystar purred, amused.

Leafdapple led her across the grass at a swift trot, in the shade of the bushes so that the Twoleg kits didn't spot them. "We have to be careful now," he warned Poppystar as they approached the next fence. "There's a dog through here, and the Twolegs let it roam loose."

Poppystar felt her pelt prickle and her neck fur begin to rise. She wanted to ask, *Do we have to go this way?* But she was afraid that Leafdapple would think she was a coward. *I'm his Clan leader! He has to respect me.*

"Right, lead on," she mewed tensely.

Leafdapple crept along the fence until he came to a spot where the wooden boards had rotted away at the bottom. He squeezed underneath, then poked his head back through the hole. "It's okay," he whispered. "But keep quiet."

Poppystar pushed herself through the gap, feeling the bottom of the rotting wood scrape her back. She rose to her paws among more shrubs with dark leaves and huge, sweet-smelling flowers.

"The scent should hide us from the dog," Leafdapple explained.

As she followed him through the bushes Poppystar caught glimpses of the dog between the branches: a huge creature with shaggy black and brown hair and floppy ears. It was lying on a stretch of stone near the door of the Twoleg nest, separated from the cats by a stretch of grass; its nose lay on its paws and it looked as if it was asleep.

As she and Leafdapple started along the second side of the

enclosure, Poppystar began to relax, though she kept casting cautious glances at the dog. But the heavy scent of the flowers was tickling her nostrils, and before she and her Clanmate could reach the safety of the far fence, she let out an enormous sneeze.

Instantly the dog sprang to its paws and hurled itself across the grass with a series of deep-throated barks.

"Run!" Leafdapple yowled, shoving Poppystar in front of him.

Poppystar raced through the bushes, imagining she could hear the dog panting behind her, and feel its hot breath on her fur. Its rank smell swamped everything, even the heavy scent of the flowers.

With Leafdapple hard on her paws she crashed between two shrubs at the foot of the fence and clawed her way to the top. Leafdapple sprang up beside her as she crouched there, shivering. Below them, the dog was standing on its hind paws, with its forepaws halfway up the fence, and its tongue lolled as it barked.

"Shove off, flea-pelt," Leafdapple hissed. "Go and chase beetles." He didn't seem frightened, just annoyed. Turning his back on the dog, he led the way along the top of the fence. Poppystar began to follow him, only to freeze again as another flurry of barking broke out from the next Twoleg den.

"It's okay," Leafdapple meowed, glancing back. "This dog is usually shut in the house."

"'Usually' isn't 'always,'" Poppystar muttered as she forced her paws to move again.

They had crept several fox-lengths along the fence when Poppystar heard a rattling noise. Her belly fluttered as a small door in the big Twoleg door swung open. But no dog appeared; instead a dark brown tabby she-cat slid through the opening. She brought with her a waft of familiar scent, and there was a distinctive shape to her pricked ears.

"Shortwhisker!" Poppystar gasped. "No—sorry—I mean Lark." She leaped down from the fence and bounded across the garden to

touch noses with the dark tabby.

Leafdapple followed more slowly. "You two know each other?" he asked, looking stunned.

"Oh, yes," Poppystar replied. "Lark used to belong to Skyclan, back in the early days when Sandstar was with us. But she decided that being a kittypet suited her better."

"The life of a warrior wasn't for me," Lark declared quite cheerfully. "It's good to see you again, Poppystar. The Clan must be doing well —you look almost as well fed as me." He paused, looking Leafdapple over from ears to tail-tip. "What do you want, trespassing on my territory?"

"He's with me," Poppystar meowed. "He's my Clanmate."

Lark looked puzzled. "But I've seen him around here before. Isn't he a kittypet?"

"Er... I'm sort of both," Leafdapple admitted, giving his shoulder a couple of embarrassed licks.

"*Both?* Can't you make up your mind?" Lark asked with a disdainful sniff.

"There are several cats like that in Skyclan now," Poppystar put in. "They come to the gorge for training and hunting, and then go back to their housefolk at night." She hesitated and then added, "You could do that if you want to, Lark. You could be Shortwhisker again."

For a heartbeat she thought that Lark might agree. Then she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Poppystar. I like my life as it is. But it's still great to see you," she added warmly. "I'm glad Skyclan is still there."

"Always," Poppystar promised, hoping that it was true.

Lark turned her head at the sound of a Twoleg voice calling from the nest. "I'd better go," she went on with a touch of wistfulness. "Goodbye, Poppystar. Say hi to all my old Clanmates for me."

"I will," Poppystar touched noses with Lark again before she bounded back across the garden and into the Twoleg den.

I wonder if I should have tried harder to persuade her to be a daylight warrior, she wondered as she followed Leafdapple back onto the fence. *She has skills we could use, learned from Sandstar and Fireheart. Maybe Birdpaw and Cobaltclaw would be more willing to take orders from her than the other Twolegplace cats.*

Leafdapple led her down from the fence, across an alley, and through a half-open gate into yet another enclosed square of grass. "This is where Snookpaw lives," he announced.

To Poppystar, the Twoleg nest looked exactly like all the others they had passed. "How do you know?" she asked.

"The blue pots over there," Poppystar replied, pointing with his tail to some round shiny things near the nest door. "The scent of the herbs by the fence. And the little birch tree in the middle of the grass."

"Okay, if you're sure." Poppystar narrowed her eyes. The tree was a spindly thing trapped in a circle of earth in the middle of a patch of grass. *It's not a proper forest tree.*

She tasted the air for Snookpaw's scent, but there was such a mingled smell of Twolegs and monsters that she couldn't pick up any trace of it. *She must still be shut in. She certainly hasn't been out here recently.*

She and Leafdapple crept closer to the nest until they could hide behind a big green object with round paws. Poppystar wrinkled her nose at the rotting scent of Twoleg rubbish that came from it.

"Snookpaw!" Leafdapple let out a low wail. "Snookpaw, we're here! Come out!"

Poppystar joined her voice to his, but there was no sign of the apprentice. Every hair on her pelt prickled with fear. *Have the Twolegs taken her away?*

She was almost ready to give up, when she spotted a small black

and white head pop up inside one of the windows.

"There she is!" Leafdapple yowled.

Their pelts brushing, the two cats raced up to the window and jumped onto the narrow ledge outside it. Snookpaw pressed her nose against the shiny stuff that filled the window space. Poppystar thought she looked thin and sorry for herself.

"Snookpaw, are you okay?" she meowed.

"I'll be fine," Snookpaw replied, her voice faint because of the shiny stuff in the way. "Poppystar, I can't believe you came here!"

I can't believe it, either.

"We can't talk to her like this," Leafdapple muttered with an annoyed flick of his tail. "Poppystar, do you think you could get in through there?" He angled his ears toward a tiny open window at the top of the big closed one.

Go inside a Twoleg nest? I didn't plan on that. "What about the Twolegs?" she asked, "They won't want strange cats inside their den."

"They've gone out," Snookpaw told her, stretching up to press her forepaws against the window. "Why don't you come in? I'm lonely all on my own here."

Poppystar was still reluctant, but she wouldn't let her nervousness show in front of her Clanmates. "It'll be a tight squeeze," she replied, eyeing the gap doubtfully, "but I'll give it a try."

A vine was growing up the side of the window; Poppystar used the tough stem to claw her way up. Scrabbling with her hind paws she forced her way through the narrow gap and plopped down onto the floor of the Twoleg nest. Leafdapple dropped down beside her a couple of heartbeats later.

The floor felt cold and unwelcoming underpaw, and the air was filled with unfamiliar scents. There was a faint buzzing noise in the air. Huge shiny objects lined the walls of the den; Poppystar

thought they were gazing at her in the dim light, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Every hair on Poppystar's pelt began to rise. There was too much to take in at once, and all her muscles were shrieking at her to flee. Taking a few deep breaths, she made herself stand her ground.

"What's going on, Snookpaw?" she hissed.

Snookpaw didn't reply right away. "Come this way," she mewed, waving her tail. "It's better through here."

Keeping low, Leafdapple and Poppystar crept through an open door into a different part of the den. Here the floor was covered with something like grass, but it was short and much softer, and made up of different bright colors.

"Weird..." Poppystar muttered, flexing her claws in it.

This area was filled with what looked like squashy boulders, in the same bright colors; remembering the pile of Twoleg waste, Poppystar recognized what Snookpaw had called a *sofa.* She watched as the apprentice sprang up onto it and settled down; it looked comfortable, but Poppystar decided not to join her, preferring to stay on her paws with one eye on her escape route.

"We've missed you, Snookpaw," she mewed. Her voice sounded strange in the enclosed space, muffled by the fuzzy floor and the sofas. "Why haven't you been back to the gorge?"

Snookpaw looked at her paws, and gave one of them a lick. "I had a pain in my chest. My housefolk took me to the medicine Twoleg, and he gave me some sort of weird food to eat—things like white seeds, and they taste foul."

"You would be better off with herbs from Echosong," Poppystar told her. "I'll bring you some, if you like."

"No, thanks, Poppystar." Snookpaw shook her head. "I'm feeling better now. Besides, my housefolk hardly ever leave me alone. This is the first time I've been on my own since I came back from the gorge, so you probably won't be able to get in here again." She

heaved a deep sigh. "I really miss being in the Clan."

Gloomily she stared out of the window. Following her gaze, Poppystar could see nothing but a small patch of sky and a Twoleg fence. *She can't see any real trees,* she realized, sharing her pain. She felt trapped and hot, and couldn't figure how any cat could stand being inside here all day and all night, without even the chance to feel earth beneath their paws.

While Poppystar had been talking to Snookpaw, Leafdapple had been padding around the den, poking his nose into corners and giving everything a good sniff. Poppystar wondered how he had the confidence; she had a hard time not freezing into a crouch with her eyes closed, trying to shut out the stifling sights and smells.

"This nest isn't too bad," Leafdapple meowed, returning from his explorations. "I hope your housefolk gave you a comfortable place to sleep."

"I'll show you," Snookpaw invited, jumping down from the sofa.

Waving her tail, she led them back into the first area and pointed to a small squashy boulder in one corner. Its bright surface was covered in Snookpaw's fur, and heavy with her scent.

"That looks... nice," Poppystar murmured politely, though privately she thought the moss and bracken of the dens in the gorge was much better for sleeping.

"And there's my food bowl," Snookpaw added, twitching her whiskers toward a brightly colored Twoleg thing half full of small brown pellets.

"They feed you rabbit droppings?" Poppystar gasped. "Do they want you to get sick?"

"No, that's a special sort of Twoleg food for kittypets," Leafdapple explained. His eyes glimmered with amusement and he gave Poppystar an affectionate nudge with his shoulder. "Try one."

Poppystar shot him a doubtful look. The last thing she wanted was to put one of the shriveled brown things into her mouth, but it

would be cowardly to refuse. She padded up to the bowl and sniffed. *Yuck!* Delicately she picked up a single pellet and rolled it around on her tongue; the den was so full of harsh smells that she couldn't really taste anything. *Just as well,* she thought, *if it tastes anything like it looks!*

Just then Poppystar heard the sound of a monster, growing rapidly louder and then cutting off abruptly. Alarm sprang into Snookpaw's eyes and her fur bristled.

"My Twolegs! They're back!"

Poppystar gulped down the pellet, almost choking. "We've got to get out of here!" she rasped.

Even while she was speaking she heard a harsh clicking sound, and footsteps just beyond the den wall. For a few heartbeats her terror paralyzed her.

"I'll delay them! You climb out, quick," Snookpaw mewed. With a whisk of her tail she vanished through another door.

Leafdapple was already streaking across to the window and leaped up to the opening in one massive bound. "Come on," he urged Poppystar, balancing precariously. "I'll pull you up."

Poppystar bunched her muscles and put all her strength into her jump-. She felt her front paws land on the edge of the window, and slid out her claws to grip. Leafdapple's teeth met in her scruff.

At the same moment she heard Snookpaw, somewhere out of sight, her voice raised in loud mewing. "Oh, I've missed you! Where did you go? Stroke my ears! I'm feeling better now."

Leafdapple dragged Poppystar through the open window and both cats tumbled onto the stony path outside the nest in a tangle of legs and tails.

A last yowl came from Snookpaw. "Run!"

Poppystar didn't need telling twice. With Leafdapple beside her, she raced across the garden and out through the half-open gate.

"Just get us back to the gorge!" she panted to Leafdapple, and added silently to herself, *I'll chew my own tail off before I come here again!*

Chapter 18

"Poppystar, I'm so sorry!" Leafdapple wailed. "I should never have let you get into danger like that. I wasn't thinking."

The two cats had crossed the border of Skyclan territory and were heading across the open grassy stretch toward the edge of the gorge. Poppystar paused, thanking Starclan for the clean air and yielding earth of her home.

"It wasn't your fault, Leafdapple," she meowed.

The mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom refused to be reassured. "It was my fault," he insisted. "I should have been more careful. But I promise you, the Twolegplace isn't always as dangerous as that."

"I'm sure it's not," Poppystar responded as they went on. "It's just that I'm not used to it." Inwardly her heart was still pounding, and she didn't ever want to go back to the Twolegplace. She watched Leafdapple moving confidently through the long grass at the top of the cliff, his ears pricked and his nostrils flared.

He's a warrior! How can he stand living somewhere like that?

"Don't you miss being outside, under all this sky, with the wind and the scent of trees in your fur?" she blurted out.

Leafdapple turned to face her, a puzzled look in his eyes. For a couple of heartbeats he didn't reply. "Yes," he mewed at last, "but I get to feel it every day when I come here." He blinked. "It's not a hardship for me to be in my Twolegs' nest. I love my housefolk, and they love me."

Poppystar still found it impossible to understand. How could any cat want to live in that world of harsh scents, loud noises, and hard surfaces underpaw? She couldn't imagine what Leafdapple's housefolk offered that tempted him back every night.

When they reached the gorge, Cherrytail was just returning at the head of a hunting patrol, with Stumpy, Cory, Cobaltclaw, and Frecklepaw.

"Where's Snookpaw?" he asked, dropping a squirrel onto the fresh-kill pile. "I thought you were going to rescue her."

"She doesn't need rescuing," Leafdapple replied. "She's been ill, and her housefolk are keeping her inside until she's better."

"What do Twolegs know?" Cherrytail gave a scornful sniff. "Snookpaw would be better off here in the fresh air, with Echosong to give her the herbs she needs."

Poppystar agreed with him, but she saw Leafdapple start to bristle at the deputy's contemptuous tone, and thought it wasn't a good idea to say so.

"Has any cat checked the elders' bedding?" she meowed, to distract the two toms before a quarrel developed. "I don't want Lichenfur complaining again."

"Good thought," Cherrytail mewed with a brisk nod. "Frecklepaw, will you get onto that?"

Frecklepaw blinked, and it was Cobaltclaw who replied, "All by himself?" His tone was sharp. "Nettlepaw and Birdpaw are out on patrol."

"I don't mind—" Frecklepaw began, only to be interrupted by Stumpy, who padded up from the fresh-kill pile.

"We'll help, won't we, Cory? We said we'd do apprentice tasks."

The black tom nodded. "We're happy to. Especially when Snookpaw isn't here. It's a shame her Twolegs won't let her out."

"I hope she'll be okay," Stumpy added.

"I'm sure she will. She'll be back soon," Poppystar assured them.

Mollified, Cobaltclaw stepped back, and Frecklepaw went off

happily with the two warriors toward the elders' den. Poppystar watched them go, impressed by how willingly Stumpy and Cory had offered their help, and their concern for Snookpaw.

They're really starting to fit into the Clan.

"Poppystar! Poppystar, hurry!"

Startled by Sharpclaw's voice raised in an excited yowl, Poppystar turned to see the young dark ginger tabby warrior bounding down the trail.

"Come quick," she puffed as she leaped down the last couple of tail-lengths to land in front of Poppystar. "There's something you have to see." Without waiting for a response, she whipped around and bounded back up the trail.

Poppystar exchanged a baffled glance with Cherrytail, then followed, catching up to Sharpclaw at the top of the cliff. "What's all this about?"

"I was on a border patrol with Tinycloud, Rainfur, and Birdpaw," Sharpclaw explained breathlessly, leading Poppystar into the woods. "We picked up that loner's scent again, beside the rubbish heap. This time we followed it over the border—"

"You did what?" Poppystar interrupted. "Without telling me or Cherrytail? You know you shouldn't do that."

"Sorry," Sharpclaw meowed, not sounding repentant in the least. "We didn't go far. And we found her, though she doesn't know it yet!"

Poppystar felt even more puzzled as she followed the young cat through the woodland and past the clearing with the heap of Twoleg waste. She smelled fresh scent markers as they crossed the border; a few fox-lengths farther on Sharpclaw dropped to a crouch and crept forward through a belt of thick undergrowth.

Rainfur, Birdpaw, and Tinycloud were waiting in the shelter of a bramble thicket.

"She's still here!" Tinycloud whispered excitedly, waving his tail toward a nearby clump of fern.

Peering through the fronds, Poppystar spotted a skinny, cream-colored she-cat as she leaped into a beech tree, easily gaining the lowest branch. As she watched she climbed higher, jumping from branch to branch and crossing from one tree to the next, where she leaped down to the ground again. As far as she could see, she wasn't stalking anything. *She's just having fun!*

"She's like us!" Sharpclaw hissed, pressing up to Poppystar's side. "She must be descended from the old Skyclan."

Poppystar could see what Sharpclaw meant. The loner had powerful hind legs for jumping and climbing, and now she was walking comfortably on a stretch of pebbles underneath the trees as if her pads were naturally tough enough to cope with the rough surface.

"Let's go and talk to her," Tinycloud urged.

"Wait a moment," Poppystar raised her tail. "Look, she's just spotted a bird."

The cream-colored she-cat had focused her gaze on a thrush perched on a branch of the beech tree she had climbed at first. She clawed her way up the trunk of the tree next to it, keeping to the side away from the bird. Poppystar watched as she crept out onto a branch some way above the thrush and slid cautiously back into the beech tree. She remembered her hunt with Stumpy, when she had executed almost the identical move.

"She's got it!" Birdpaw whispered, his eyes gleaming as the loner dropped down and landed with perfect balance onto the narrow branch where the thrush was perching. With one swipe of her paw the she-cat sank her claws into the bird's shoulder as it tried to fly away, and killed it with a bite to the back of its neck.

"Very neat catch!" Tinycloud declared.

As the cream-colored loner climbed down the tree with her prey clamped in her jaws, Poppystar led the way out from the clump of

ferns, with the patrol behind her. As soon as she spotted them, the loner spun around, ready to flee.

"No, wait!" Poppystar mewed. "We're not trying to steal your prey. We just want to talk to you. I'm—"

The she-cat interrupted her before she could introduce herself or the others. "I've seen you before," she told her, setting down her fresh-kill. "You're those cats who live in the gorge."

"You know about us?" Tinycloud asked curiously.

"Not much. I know that you hunt together."

Tinycloud let out a puff of indignation. "It's a bit more than that!"

Poppystar touched Tinycloud's cheek gently with her tail to silence him. "I am Poppystar, leader of Skyclan," she announced, dipping her head. "Many seasons ago, other cats lived in the gorge. They were the original Skyclan, and some of these cats are descended from that ancient Clan."

The loner's whiskers twitched; Poppystar could see that she didn't understand what this had to do with her.

"Let me show her!" Sharpclaw volunteered eagerly.

Poppystar nodded assent. Instantly Sharpclaw swarmed up the beech tree, balanced along the branches until she crossed into the tree decide it, and dropped neatly onto a lower branch, just as the loner had done. "See?" she called, curling her tail up.

The cream-colored she-cat didn't look impressed. "She's just copying me."

"I am not!" Sharpclaw reported, her fur fluffed up. "I've always been able to do that. Now I teach apprentices to do it, too."

The loner shrugged. "Okay, but I don't know why you're telling me."

Is she mouse-brained or what? Poppystar wondered. *Can't she see that she must be descended from Ancient Skyclan, too?* "Would you like to

visit the gorge and find out more about us?" she offered.

The she-cat stared at her. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you might want to join us!" Birdpaw blurted out, bouncing on all four paws with excitement.

Poppystar bit back a rebuke. *I was trying to take it slowly, and now she'll think we're trying to force her into something.*

The loner was gazing at Birdpaw as if she thought the apprentice had gone mad. "No, thanks, I can hunt for myself," she replied.

"But it's really great in the gorge," Sharpclaw insisted, jumping down to join the others. "We all look out for one another—"

"And we meet on the Skyrock to talk to Starclan," Tinycloud added.

Poppystar winced. *Now she'll think we've got bees in our brain!*

"Do come," Rainfur persuaded. "You'll learn all sorts of stuff, and meet new friends."

The loner took a step back; Poppystar realized that the others were overwhelming her. "That's enough," she told the patrol. "She doesn't have to come if she doesn't want to. Take care," she added to the she-cat.

"And stay out of our territory, too!" Tinycloud chipped in. "Don't try any of your fancy hunting skills on the other side of those border marks!"

The cream-colored loner snatched up her prey and raced off into the trees without looking back.

"I wish she'd stayed," Birdpaw murmured, his whiskers drooping with disappointment.

"Yes, she's already as good as a trained warrior," Sharpclaw agreed, with a lash of her tail. "And she has no idea what her hunting skills mean!"

"I wish I was descended from Skyclan," Rainfur murmured.

"You might be," Sharpclaw meowed loyally.

"Well, I can't climb trees like you can."

"I don't care." Birdpaw affectionately nuzzled his mother's shoulder fur. "You're perfect just as you are!"

The sun was going down; the trees cast long, black shadows and a chilly breeze whispered over the grass. It was time to return to the gorge. Poppystar collected her patrol with a sweep of her tail; as they headed back through the trees, Tinycloud came to pad beside her.

"If I see the loner again, I'll have another go at trying to persuade her," he promised.

"Don't try too hard," Poppystar warned him, brushing his shoulder with her tail-tip. "And don't be too tough about chasing her off. Skyclan is open to those who want to join, but there's room in the woods for loners, too, as long as they respect our borders."

We don't need to force any cat to swell the ranks of Skyclan. Let's wait and see what happens.

Chapter 19

No upload tomorrow since its a holiday and I don't have work!

Haze prodded across the grass of a Twoleg garden. Ahead of him, the nest was outlined against a harsh scarlet sky. There was a metallic tang in the air, and when Haze looked down he saw that his paws were clogged with blood. A Twoleg rabbit lay dead in front of him, and scraps of black and white fur littered the ground.

I didn't kill it! Haze thought, bewildered.

He turned to flee as the door of the Twoleg nest was flung open and a huge male Twoleg charged out. It opened its jaws to yowl, but what came out was the terrified screech of a cat.

Haze jumped; his eyes blinked open and he found himself curled up in a huddle with Harper, Stumpy, and Cory in the shelter of a sloping sheet of wood that rested against the wall of a Twoleg den. Wind swirled along the alley and rain spattered down, pushing cold claws into Haze's fur.

The terrified screech came again. Raising his head, Haze spotted Tracy a few fox-lengths away, her fur bristling as she gazed around wildly with her one good eye. "They're here!" she yowled. "Swift and Bear are coming!"

Haze stiffened and Stumpy started awake, but at that moment Winter appeared from behind a garbage can and rested his white tail over Tracy's shoulders.

"No cat is coming," he mewed soothingly. "You had a bad dream, that's all. Come back here with me and Cinder."

Tracy stood still for a moment longer, her fur gradually beginning to lie flat, then followed the white tom back into shelter.

Stumpy stretched her jaws in a yawn. "Tracy and her nightmares.

She's afraid she's going to lose the other eye."

Anger churned in Haze's belly. *We have to do something about Swift.*

Stumpy had already lowered her head and curled up again. Haze checked on Harper and Cory, who were still asleep; Cory was snoring softly, blowing out his breath through his whiskers, while Harper's ear twitched as if she was dreaming.

Haze settled down and closed his eyes. *We need all the sleep we can get if we're going to catch enough prey at night.*

The cold weather meant that prey was scarce, especially when they had to compete with Swift and his followers for every mouse, bird, and scrawny squirrel. Haze unsheathed his claws and let them sink into the damp soil, remembering how Swift was claiming more and more time for her cats to hunt, even though the days grew dark early.

I don't want to give into her. But how can we hunt if we have to get into a fight every time?

Harper's scent and the feeling of her pelt pressed up against his soothed Haze's anger. The young she-cat had always been away so much lately; it was good to have her back. She was looking sleek and well fed, too, suggesting to Haze that she had been hunting farther afield.

That's fine with me. Just as long as she doesn't put herself at risk of getting attacked by Swift and her flea-ridden friends while she's on her own.

Not for the first time, Haze wondered if they should all leave and find somewhere else to live, maybe the place where Harper was hunting.

But we were here first. This is our home, and I don't want to give it up.

A faint sound from the corner of the alley disturbed him as he was slipping into sleep again. As he lifted his head, unsure what had roused him, Harper rose to her paws.

"I'll go and investigate," she meowed, trotting off with her tail raised high.

Haze sprang up. "Wait, I'll come with you."

Harper turned on him, her lips drawn back in the beginnings of a snarl. "Don't you trust me?" she snapped. "I'm not a kit anymore! Don't you think I can look after myself?"

Haze struggled out from the narrow gap behind the sheet of wood and ran after the young she-cat as she stalked away down the alley. "Wait!" he called. "I didn't mean..."

"I know exactly what you meant," Harper hissed, refusing to look at him."

"No, you don't!" Haze picked up his pace. "I'm trying to help you."

This time Harper whirled around to face him. Her green eyes blazed with anger and she gave a single lash of her tail. "I don't *need* help. I'm not stupid; I know how to stay away from Swift. And if I do run into her or her cats, I can fight as well as the rest of you. Why won't you see that?"

"I *do* see it, but..." Haze ran out of words. With a growl of frustration, he finished, "Everything would be easier if Twig was still here."

As soon as the words were out, he knew he had said the wrong thing.

"Don't you dare blame my mother!" Harper spat. "I know what's wrong. You wish I'd never been born! I'm obviously too much of a burden for you."

Spinning around again, she raced off, her tail flowing out behind her.

"Harper, come back and—"

Haze broke off as he spotted a flash of dark ginger fur at the corner where Harper was heading. *One of Swift's cats is lying in wait for her!*

"Harper!" he yowled.

Harper whisked around the corner as if she hadn't heard. The other cat slipped closer, though he kept to the shadows and Haze couldn't get a good look at him.

Haze was about to follow, when a terrible noise exploded behind him: yowling and crashing and rattling coming from the other end of the alley. Haze spun around, every hair on his pelt standing on end.

Twolegs were pouring into the mouth of the alley. They carried sticks, banging and clattering them against shiny silver circles and sheets of wood. Their voices were raised in shouts and screams that made a flock of sparrows rush up from a nearby wall, chattering in alarm.

Haze raced back down the alley to where Stumpy and Cory were huddled behind a garbage can, their eyes wide with terror.

"Out!" he snapped, shoving them both into the open. "Run!"

Closer to the Twolegs, Cinder and Winter were trying to urge Tracy along, but the dark gray tabby could hardly stagger between them, her legs stiff and her gaze fixed as if she had seen her worst nightmares come true.

There was no sign of Harper or the other cat Haze had spotted in the shadows. For a moment he was torn between staying to help his friends, or going after his daughter. With a quick glance up and down the alley he realized that his companions could look after themselves and help one another.

Harper is all alone, with that strange cat after her!

He turned tail on the Twolegs and bolted around the corner after Harper and the other cat. Almost at once he picked up his daughter's scent and the scent of the cat he had glimpsed in the shadows. Harper was definitely being followed. The banging and crashing carried on behind him, but he was too worried about Harper to turn back. He opened his mouth to distinguish the cat

scents among all the other smells that thronged the air and kept his ears pricked to pick up the tiniest sound beneath the din from the attacking Twolegs.

The trail led him down the alley and through a series of backyards until it reached a crumbling wooden Twoleg nest. The door hung off its fastenings, and there were gaping holes in the walls and roof. Brambles had wound their tendrils around the walls as if they were trying to pull it into the earth.

Haze's belly churned. *That cat has Harper trapped in there!*

There was no sound when he paused to listen, so he followed the scent trail through a gap in the brambles that led to a jagged hole in the shed wall. In the darkness he could just make out two shadows close together, the larger figure bending over the smaller one.

Has that cat killed her?

Haze leaped into the shed with a screech and thrust the other cat away from his daughter. They rolled together on the hard earth floor in a tangle of legs and tail.

"What are you *doing*?" Harper hissed.

Haze scrambled to his paws and let his opponent roll away from him. It was a powerful dark ginger tom. Green fire blazed in his eyes, and he bared his teeth in a snarl as he slid out his claws and crouched, ready to spring on Haze again.

"Red, don't!" Harper cried.

Haze whirled to face his daughter.

"I *knew* you didn't trust me," Harper spat, glaring at her father. "You followed me to spy on me!"

"I didn't!" Haze growled. "I thought you were in danger."

"She's not." The dark ginger tom, Red, padded over to Harper and stood so close to her that their pelts brushed. "I'd never let anything happen to her."

"I don't believe you!" Haze was still braced for an attack, even though the tom had sheathed his claws. "You're leading her into a trap."

"Are you completely mouse-brained?" Harper thrust her face close to her father's, her whiskers quivering in fury. "Red came to take me away from the alley today because he knew the Twolegs were going to attack."

Haze stared at her. If the wooden nest had fallen around his ears at the moment, he wouldn't have been able to move. "You *knew*? And you never thought to warn the rest of us? You just went off and left us?"

"What else could I do?" Harper stood her ground, unrepentant. "None of you would have believed a warning from one of Swift's friends, would you?"

Haze wasn't going to admit she was right. "If you left us to die, you're no daughter of mine," he snarled.

"Fine!" Harper flashed back at him.

A red haze swept across Haze's eyes. He slid out his claws and raised a paw to lash his claws across his daughter's face. Red leaped in front of her, knocking Haze's paw to the side. As Haze struggled to stay on his feet, the haze of anger died away, and he saw the fear in Harper's eyes. Every muscle in his body turned to ice as he realized what he had almost done.

Haze wanted to tell her how sorry he was. But the words wouldn't come. He couldn't meet her eyes or talk to her at all. "She's all yours," he growled to Red, and turned away.

Thrusting his way through the gap in the shed wall, Haze crawled out through the bramble tunnel and across the yards into the alley. He picked up the pace until he was racing along, as if he could leave his horror and disgust behind with Harper and the dark ginger tom.

The Twoleg noise had died away as Haze approached the corner of

the alley. The air was filled with a silence that made his ears ring. As he turned the corner, Winter and Stumpy came to meet him; their eyes were wide and their fur fluffed up.

"Haze, where were you?" Stumpy wailed. "The Twolegs took Tracy!"

Chapter 20

"With so many new warriors in the Clan," Cherrytail meowed, "maybe we ought to think about expanding the territory."

The sun was up, pouring golden light into the gorge, but Poppystar's den still lay in shadow when her deputy arrived, dipping his head politely as he padded in.

"That's a good point," Poppystar mused, waving her tail to invite Cherrytail to sit beside her.

"I suggest sending out two patrols, one on either side of the gorge," the tortoiseshell and white tom went on. "They can investigate the area just outside our borders, and see if there are any good hunting grounds or moss places that we should include."

"That could work," she agreed. "And they ought to look for possible dangers as well. We don't want to enclose territory that we can't defend."

Cherrytail gave her a brisk nod. "I'll go and set up the patrols, then. I'll get Haze and Cory to lead them."

"Just a moment." Poppystar stopped her deputy as he was rising to his paws. "There were problems the other day when you assigned Haze and Cory to lead hunting patrols. The other cats aren't used to them yet."

"Then they'll have to *get* used to them," Cherrytail snapped. "Haze and the others are full warriors of Skyclan now."

Poppystar sighed. "True, but it's not as easy as that. You can't control how cats feel. Besides, is it a good idea to let newcomers lead these patrols, instead of cats who are more familiar with the territory?"

"They've all taken part in border patrols often enough," Cherrytail pointed out with a flick of his tail.

"All the same," Poppystar mewed firmly, "I don't think it's a good idea to single out the newcomers for special duties instead of cats who have grown up in the Clan. Not all the time. It's going to cause problems."

Cherrytail flexed his claws in annoyance, while Poppystar tried to ignore the rising tension between herself and her deputy. *What's happening to us? Why is Cherrytail always trying to challenge me?*

"The way I see it is—" Cherrytail began, his voice rising irritably.

He broke off as a shadow fell across the mouth of the den and Cobaltclaw poked his head inside. "Poppystar, may I have a word with you?"

"We're busy," Cherrytail meowed. "Come back later."

Already ruffled by their argument, Poppystar was furious that her deputy was answering for her. "No, Cobaltclaw, it's fine," she replied, keeping her voice steady. "Cherrytail and I were just finishing. Haze and Clovertail will lead the patrols," she added to her deputy, with a wave of her tail to dismiss him.

"Fine." Cherrytail gave his leader an icy glare and stalked out of the den.

Cobaltclaw watched him go. "I'm sorry if I interrupted something..."

"Don't worry about it," Poppystar mewed. *And now I suppose Cobaltclaw is going to complain about Frecklepaw helping Echosong again. If it's not one thing it's another.* "I'll have another word with Echosong—"

"No, it's not that," Cobaltclaw responded. "I wanted to talk to you about something else. Have you noticed that Shrewtooth hasn't been herself recently?"

Poppystar blinked in surprise. She hadn't thought much at all about the young black she-cat. Apart from her excessive nervousness, she

was quiet and she didn't cause trouble, which made her easy to overlook when other cats were making more noise.

"I'm worried that she's feeling left out," Cobaltclaw went on. "She's always been shy, but lately she hardly says anything. She never said a word at the last Gathering, and she never volunteers for patrols anymore. It's as if she thinks that no cat will want to hunt with her."

Poppystar's neck fur had begun to stand up. It sounded as if Cobaltclaw was deliberately hunting for trouble. "If Shrewtooth has a problem," she mewed, "then she ought to know she can come to me about it."

"But what if she *doesn't* know?" Cobaltclaw suggested. "You've been very busy with the visitors lately."

Poppystar bristled even more at hearing the new warriors referred to as "visitors." She didn't like Cobaltclaw's implication that she had neglected the existing members of her Clan in favor of Haze and his friends. *Is it true? Have I really been unfair to Shrewtooth?*

Poppystar had to admit that she hadn't talked to Shrewtooth for a while, and she struggled to remember putting her on any patrols. *She must have been fulfilling her warrior duties, or I would have heard about it from Cherrytail.*

"I have time for all my Clanmates," she meowed to Cobaltclaw, keen to show that she was in control. "I'll go hunting with Shrewtooth today, and give her the chance to speak to me in private."

Cobaltclaw dipped his head. "Thank you."

Once again Poppystar felt her fur rising. *I shouldn't need to be thanked for doing my duty as Clan leader!* Forcing her fur to lie flat again, she tried to convince herself that she was being oversensitive, but she still felt unsettled when Cobaltclaw had gone and she went to look for Shrewtooth.

The black she-cat was crouched by herself at the edge of the stream, staring into the water. She jumped up as Poppystar approached, her claws skittering on the stones. "Uh... Poppystar..." she stammered.

"Hi, Shrewtooth," Poppystar mewed, trying to sound casual. "I'm going hunting. Do you feel like coming with me?"

The black she-cat's eyes widened. "Yes... yes, that would be great," she choked.

"Good." Poppystar couldn't help thinking she looked as if she'd just been given a punishment. "It'll give us a chance to catch up away from all the noise and bustle around here."

Shrewtooth gave her a scared nod, as if she'd suggested they should go and fight foxes.

Poppystar's paws felt clumsy and oversized as she led the way across the Rockpile and up one of the trails on the other side of the gorge. She was acutely aware of the young she-cat following her, and a thorn of guilt stabbed her as she wondered if she was actually afraid of her.

I'm her Clan leader! She should trust me, not act as if I'm going to claw her ears off!

At the top of the cliff, she headed for the deeper woodland on the border of their territory. Shrewtooth padded behind her, starting at every rustle in the undergrowth. When a blackbird shot out of the ferns just ahead, she jumped, then arched her back and dug her claws into the ground as if she was facing an enemy.

"It's only a blackbird," Poppystar mewed mildly.

"Sorry! I'm really sorry!" Shrewtooth looked so miserable that Poppystar wished she hadn't spoken.

I just wanted to reassure her, not tell her off!

"It's okay," she muttered. "Let's hunt."

Shouldering her way through the bracken, she tasted the air and picked up the scent of a thrush. She glanced back at Shrewtooth and angled her ears toward the bird, which was pulling a worm out of the ground at the foot of an oak tree a couple of fox-lengths ahead.

At once Shrewtooth dropped into the hunter's crouch and began to creep forward. Poppystar watched her action approvingly. *She would be a good hunter if she weren't so nervous.*

But Shrewtooth had hardly moved when the thrush tugged the worm free and flew up with it onto a low branch of the oak tree. Shrewtooth turned to Poppystar, her eyes wide with distress, as if she expected a scolding for letting the prey escape.

"Not your fault," Poppystar whispered. "We'll catch it anyway. Work your way around the tree and climb up from the other side. Find yourself a branch just above the thrush."

Shrewtooth nodded and slipped off. When she had gone, Poppystar slid through the bracken in the other direction until she could climb an ash tree whose branches mingled with the oak's.

The thrush had swallowed the worm and was shifting from foot to foot on the branch. Poppystar spotted Shrewtooth's face peering out from a clump of leaves just above. Cautiously she crept out along a branch until she could cross into the oak, this time below the thrush. When she was a tail-length away she rose to her paws and let out an earsplitting screech.

Now, Shrewtooth!

The black warrior was ready. As the thrush fluttered upward with a raucous alarm call, Shrewtooth swiped out a paw and snagged her claws in its feathers. She grabbed it by the neck in her jaws and scrambled out of the leaves, her eyes glowing with triumph.

"Well done!" Poppystar meowed.

She leaped down to the ground; a heartbeat later Shrewtooth landed beside her with a soft thud, her prey in her teeth.

"That was great!" she puffed, dropping the thrush at Poppystar's paws. "Can we do it again?"

He was quivering with excitement now, not fear. *She's a different cat,* Poppystar thought. "I certainly hope we can," she replied. "Let's just bury this, and we'll see what else we can find."

When she had scratched earth over the thrush, Poppystar padded on, relieved that Shrewtooth had boosted her confidence with a good catch. She tasted the scent markers as they crossed the border, but there was no scent of prey close by.

Where has everything gone? she wondered, flicking her tail in frustration as she headed deeper into the woods. Instead of the prey-scents she was hoping for, she picked up the taint of rotting crow-food and the smell of dog. Rounding a bramble thicket, she found herself in a clearing. At the opposite side was a broken-down Twoleg fence, with an untidy red-stone nest beyond.

I know this place! she realized, halting in shock. *It's where we rescued Rainfur and the kits from the Twoleg who kept her a prisoner.*

The fur along her spine stood up as she remembered being part of the patrol led by Sandstar: how Cherrytail and Clovertail had made such a racket fighting in the garden that the Twoleg had come out, leaving the door open for Poppystrom, Sandstar, and Petalnose, Rainfur's mate, to slip inside the den and bring out Rainfur with her kits.

Poppystar had never meant to come back here. It was a dark place, heavy with the memory of Twoleg cruelty. "Come on, Shrewtooth," she meowed. "Let's—"

She broke off when she turned and saw the young black she-cat crouched on the ground, her claws digging into the earth and her eyes tight shut. "Oh, no, no..." she whispered.

Puzzled, Poppystar touched her tail to the black warrior's shoulder. "Shrewtooth? What's the matter?"

The young she-cat stared up at her, her eyes stretched so wide with horror that she thought they might burst out of her head. "It's a trap... a trap," she moaned. "You brought me here... I knew you never wanted me in the Clan! But I'll never go back!" she added fiercely. "Never!"

"Shrewtooth, I don't know what you mean." Poppystar spoke gently. She had never seen any cat as frightened as this, not even when

Sandstar had led them against the rats in the barn. "Of course I want you in Skyclan. I made you a warrior, didn't I?"

Shrewtooth blinked, but she was still shaking with terror. "Yes... you did... but this place... it's evil... evil..."

Poppystar guessed that for whatever reason the Twoleg den had driven Shrewtooth into a daze of fear. She decided that pointing out there was no sign of danger right now wouldn't help at all. "Yes, it's a foul place, so we won't stay here," she meowed. "We'll find somewhere else to hunt. Come on."

She nudged Shrewtooth to her paws and guided her with her tail across her shoulders, back around the bramble thicket and through the woods until they crossed the border into Skyclan territory.

But Shrewtooth was still in no state to hunt. Her eyes were unfocused as if inwardly they were still fixed on the dark den. She kept on shaking, and stumbled over every pebble and twig in her path. Poppystar realized that all she could do was lead her back to camp.

"Poppystar, what happened?" Echosong popped his head out of his den as Poppystar guided Shrewtooth into the medicine cat's outer cave.

The young black she-cat sank to the ground, shivering, and covered her nose with her tail. Poppystar sat beside her, exhausted by the long journey back, nudging Shrewtooth every paw step of the way.

"Is she hurt?" Echosong queried, padding up to Shrewtooth and giving her a sniff.

"No, I don't know what the matter is," Poppystar replied. "We were out hunting, and we ended up beside that Twoleg den—the one where Rainfur was shut up. And suddenly Shrewtooth was like this. She won't explain why."

"Shrewtooth?" Echosong bent closer to the quivering black she-cat and touched her ear lightly with his nose. "You're safe here. Tell us what we can do to help."

But Shrewtooth's only reply was a low moaning sound.

Echosong sighed and shook his head. "I think the best I can do is give her some poppy seeds to help her sleep. Maybe when she wakes she'll be able to talk about it."

Poppystar nodded. "If you think that's best."

While Echosong went to fetch poppy seeds from the niche in the rock where he kept his supplies. Poppystar slipped out of the den. Glancing around, she spotted Nettlepaw padding past with a mouse dangling from her jaws.

"Nettlepaw, I need you to fetch Rainfur," she meowed. "Tell her it's urgent."

The apprentice sped off, tossing her prey onto the fresh-kill pile as she went. *Maybe Rainfur can get some sense out of Shrewtooth,* Poppystar thought as she returned to the den.

She found that Echosong had moved Shrewtooth into one of the scrapes in the floor of the outer cave, where sick cats lay to be treated. He was shaking out a poppy head so that the black seeds fell out near Shrewtooth's nose.

"Lick those up," he ordered.

The black warrior shuddered, but raised her head to do as she was told, then sank back into the nest with a sigh. Gradually her breathing steadied and her shivering died away. Poppystar thought that she might be drifting into sleep, when Rainfur appeared at the mouth of the den.

"Nettlepaw said you wanted me," the light gray flecked she-cat meowed, with a polite nod to Echosong.

As quickly as she could, Poppystar told her about their visit to the old Twoleg den, and how it had affected Shrewtooth.

Understanding flooded into Rainfur's blue eyes. "Can't you see?" she asked when Poppystar had finished. "That Twoleg must have shut Shrewtooth up there, too."

Without waiting for Poppystar to reply, she padded across the outer cave to Shrewtooth and crouched down beside her, stroking her shoulder with her tail. "You were there, weren't you, in that horrible den?" she mewed softly. "Do you want to tell us about it?"

"I was born on a farm," Shrewtooth began, her voice a drowsy whisper. "My father died when I was still a kit, and I strayed off into the woods. I was managing all right, hunting mice and shrews, and then this filthy old Twoleg came and grabbed me."

A shudder ran through her. Rainfur went on stroking her and murmured, "But it's over now. You're safe."

"He shut me in his den with a nest of dirty old pelts," Shrewtooth went on. Her voice had sunk even lower, so that Poppystar and Echosong had to creep closer to hear. "He fed me crow-food... when he fed me at all. Even the smell made me sick. His dog was always barking and snuffling around the den where I was shut in, and I was terrified that it would get at me."

"A dog?" Rainfur sounded shocked. "That's awful. There was no dog when I was there."

"It's a huge brute, with such big teeth..." Another shudder rippled through Shrewtooth.

"It's not here now. You'll never have to see it again," Rainfur promised.

"But what if it gets loose in the woods?"

Poppystar wondered if that was the reason for Shrewtooth's nervousness. *Is she always expecting the Twoleg's dog to leap out at her?* "The dog won't come after you here," she meowed. "And even if it does, we have warriors who can deal with it."

"How did you escape?" Echosong prompted her.

"I climbed up and up." Sleep, brought on by the poppy seeds, was blurring Shrewtooth's words. "Up through a long, dark tunnel that led into the sky. And then I fell down and down until I landed in a bramble thicket."

"You were very brave," Rainfur gave the black she-cat's ear a lick.

"The dog knew I was there," Shrewtooth went on. "But I was in the middle of the thicket, and it couldn't get at me. At last it went away, and I got out. I'd wrenched one of my legs but I managed to make it as far as the cliffs."

"And Fallowfern found you there," Poppystar finished for her. "I'm glad he did, Shrewtooth. I'm proud to have you as a warrior of Skyclan."

Shrewtooth shook her head, rustling the bracken underneath her. "I was ashamed because the Twoleg kept me a prisoner," she confessed. "That's why I never told any cat where I came from."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," Rainfur assured her gently. "I was a prisoner there, too, with Nettlepaw and Birdpaw, when they were kits."

Shrewtooth blinked and struggled to focus on the light gray flecked she-cat. "You were?"

"I don't like to talk about it either," Rainfur continued. "And I had to be rescued. You escaped all by yourself. You should be proud, not ashamed.

Shrewtooth's only reply was a long sigh; she seemed to relax.

"She's sleeping now," Echosong murmured, giving her another sniff. "You'd better leave her to rest."

Poppystar padded out of the den with Rainfur close behind. Her belly churned with a mixture of fury and helplessness. "Twolegs!" she spat, scraping her claws on the path. "They think they can do anything they want!"

"How *dare* he do that to Shrewtooth!" Rainfur was just as angry, flexing her claws and lashing her tail. "I hate thinking that more cats have suffered like I did. Poppystar, we need to teach that Twoleg a lesson!"

Poppystar stared at her. "We're just cats. What can we do against

Twolegs?"

"Plenty." A threatening meow came from behind Poppystar; she glanced over her shoulder to see Cherrytail padding up, his green eyes flashing fury. Obviously he had overheard enough to work out what was going on. "That Twoleg is an enemy of Skyclan," he announced, swiping one forepaw through the air to emphasize his words. "And he'll be treated as such!"

Poppystar wasn't sure what Cherrytail intended to do, but she told him everything that Shrewtooth had said.

"So there's a dog there now," Cherrytail mused when she had finished. "That makes it more complicated. We'd have to deal with it..." His voice died away thoughtfully.

"Just a moment," Poppystar meowed. "I haven't said that we're going to *deal with* anything."

"You can't ignore this." There was a flame burning in Rainfur's blue eyes that Poppystar had never seen there before. "How many more cats does this Twoleg get to torture?"

"I think you should call a Clan meeting," Cherrytail suggested. "See what other cats think."

Poppystar considered her deputy's idea for a moment. She wasn't happy about it; she felt as if she was putting a paw into a fast-flowing river that might well sweep her away, and her Clanmates with her. But Cherrytail and Rainfur had a point: The Clan was at risk with this cruel Twoleg living so close to their borders.

"Very well," she decided, and jumped up to the top of the Rockpile.

The clouds had built up while Poppystar and Shrewtooth were returning from the woods, and a cold wind buffeted her fur as she stood on the smooth gray boulders. She shivered as she let out a yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting!"

Sharpclaw, Rockshade, and Fallowfern appeared from the warriors' den and padded down the trail. Lichenfur and Tangle emerged to sit

in the entrance to their den, while Patchfoot listened from the ledge outside the new birthing den. Birdpaw joined his littermate, Nettlepaw, near Echosong's den. The medicine cat sat in the entrance, where she could keep an eye on Shrewtooth as she slept.

Waspwhisker guided her kits down the trail from the nursery and tried hard to make them sit quietly while they bounced around with excitement. Leafdapple, Cobaltclaw, and Frecklepaw appeared from the direction of the training area, and sat side by side, grooming sand out of their pelts.

Poppystar looked around. None of the newcomers had arrived for the meeting, nor had Harleymoon and Amber. *They must still be out on patrol.* She was about to start speaking, when she spotted Clovertail heading up the gorge with Stumpy, Cory, and Tinycloud. They looked surprised to see a Clan meeting in progress, and bounded up to listen.

Poppystar began by explaining what had happened that morning, adding the story of Rainfur's imprisonment for the benefit of those cats who hadn't been Clan members at the time. While she was still speaking Haze's patrol returned, with Cinder, Bouncefire, and Sparrowpelt, who were quickly brought up to date by their Clanmates.

As Poppystar finished, she saw pelts beginning to fluff up, claws sliding out, tails lashing, as her warriors learned what had happened to Rainfur and Shrewtooth. Her misgivings increased.

Cherrytail will easily convince them we have to fight back. And I'm not sure that's the right thing. It's not the same as fighting against the rats.

"So why are you telling us this?" Sharpclaw called. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Claw the Twolegs' ears off!" Tinycloud yowled from the back of the crowd.

"Yes, and his dog!" Sparrowpelt added.

Murmurs of agreement rose from the rest of the Clan, though

Poppystar noticed that the new warriors didn't join in. They sat close together, glancing uneasily at one another and saying nothing.

Cherrytail rose to his paws from where he was sitting at the foot of the Rockpile, and raised his tail for silence. "You're right, something must be done," he began, "but—"

He broke off as Harleymoon and Amber raced over the rim of the gorge and skittered down the trail, only just managing to come to a halt at the edge of the crowd of cats.

"Sorry!" Harleymoon panted. "I know we're late, but Amber's Twolegs didn't let her out."

"What's going on here?" Amber wheezed.

Sparrowpelt bounced over to them and repeated the story in an excited whisper while Cherrytail continued.

"This Twoleg is a danger to any cat who goes near him. He could be a danger to us especially if we decide to expand our territory on that side of the gorge. Something has to be done."

"I know!" Tinycloud jumped up. "Let's dig a big pit and lure the Twoleg into it."

"Great idea!" his littermate Sharpclaw agreed. "We could throw things at him."

Cherrytail rolled his eyes. "Right, let me know when you've dug a pit big enough. Like, by next leaf-bare."

Mrrows of amusement broke out among the Clan. Tinycloud sat down again, twisting his head to give his back a couple of licks, trying to seem unconcerned.

"I've got a better idea," Harleymoon announced, bouncing gently on her paws. "Let me go and make friends with the Twoleg. I could purr and stuff to make him like me, and he'd take me inside his den —"

"And then we'd have to rescue *you*, mouse-brain!" Sparrowpelt

interrupted.

"No, listen!" Harleymoon kinked her tail over her broad white back. "Then I let the rest of you in. And we trap the Twoleg in his own den!"

There was silence as the Clan thought about this. "What would we do with the Twoleg once we trapped him?" Poppystar asked. "And what about the dog?"

Harleymoon tipped her head to one side, looking puzzled.

"Any more brilliant ideas?" Cherrytail meowed scathingly.

Before Harleymoon could say anything, a loud wail came from Echosong's den. The medicine cat vanished rapidly inside, and returned a heartbeat later with Shrewtooth. He padded close beside her as they came to join the meeting.

"Nightmares," he mewed briefly in explanation. "I think she'll feel better if she's with the rest of us."

"Sorry," Shrewtooth muttered, her head hanging.

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Poppystar told her. "And you're welcome to join us. You might come up with some useful ideas."

"*We* have an idea." Bouncefire and Rockshade had been murmuring to each other with their heads close together; now Bouncefire rose to her paws. "We're Skyclan cats, right? So we should use Skyclan skills to deal with the Twoleg."

Rockshade stood beside her littermate. "Some of us should climb trees near the Twoleg nest. Then some others lure the Twoleg out and underneath the trees."

"And then we jump on him!" Bouncefire finished. "That's using skills from how we hunt prey. Why should we treat the Twoleg like a different kind of enemy?"

"Because he *is* a different kind of enemy!" Cinder leaped to her paws. "Are you all flea-brained? You've no idea what you're getting

yourselves into."

Several cats flinched with surprise as the black she-cat spoke. Poppystar scanned the group of newcomers. It was as clear as the sun in greenleaf that none of them wanted to take part in a raid on the Twoleg.

What do they know about Twolegs that we don't?

"Go on, Cinder," she prompted.

But it was Stumpy who spoke. "Why are you talking about hurting this Twoleg?" she demanded. "That's not the kind of thing that cats do. You should stay well clear, and be thankful you can live separately, here in the gorge. If you take on Twolegs, you are risking too much. They can hurt you worse than dogs or foxes, you know. This is not a battle that can be won—or should be fought," she finished, sitting down again with a swish of her tail.

Yowls of protest broke out from among the Clan.

"How do you know we can't win?" Fallowfern growled.

"Yes," Leafdapple agreed. "We're strong, and we can fight."

"I think you're scared!" Cobaltclaw meowed, glaring at the newcomers.

"I'm sure that's not true." Poppystar raised her tail to end the protests. "No cat is scared of the Twoleg. We just need to find a way to teach him to stop hurting cats."

A short silence followed her words; it was broken by Haze, who stood up and let his gaze travel solemnly around the Clan until every cat was waiting for him to speak.

"Fear is your best weapon," he announced quietly. "Fear leaves you hollow, paralyzed, unable to think." He dipped his head toward Shrewtooth, who was quaking miserably at the back of the crowd. "You can't hurt the Twoleg," Haze went on, "but you can frighten him."

Staring at the ragged gray tom, Poppystar wondered if he was speaking from his own experiences. Her pelt itched all over with curiosity, but she knew this wasn't the right time or place to question him. *Besides, he would never give me a straight answer.*

"I think Haze is right," Cherrytail meowed. "We need to give the Twoleg a taste of his own medicine, and make him as scared of cats as Shrewtooth is scared of him."

"So we won't actually attack the Twoleg?" Poppystar checked.

Cherrytail looked grim. "Oh, we attack him all right—we'll make him think his worst fears are coming true, that the cats he once tortured have come back to seek revenge. But we won't get close enough for him to touch us, and that way we'll keep ourselves safe. Haze is right, cats don't fight Twolegs, and never will." He shot a glance at Shrewtooth, who seemed to have shrunk even further into her pelt. "But there are ways to hurt that don't leave scars."

Poppystar narrowed her eyes. Was it possible to scare the Twoleg into leaving cats alone without risking their own pelts? "Tell us what you think we could do," she invited Cherrytail.

Leaping down from the Rockpile, she joined her deputy on the flattened sand. The rest of the Clan gathered around, huddling in the shelter of the boulders as the wind rose, sending clouds scudding across the sky.

Cherrytail stretched out one claw and drew lines in the dust in front of him. "Here's the clearing, and this is the Twoleg nest," he began as he sketched the shapes. "And this is where we'll start..."

Chapter 21

Poppystar woke as a paw prodded her in the side. "Poppystar! Poppystar, wake up!"

It was Cherrytail's voice. Poppystar opened her eyes and blinked at him as he stood over her, one paw raised to prod her again.

"What's the matter?" she muttered, scrambling out of her nest. "Are we being attacked?"

"No, but we have to go now," Cherrytail hissed. When Poppystar stared at him, puzzled, he added. "To the Twoleg's nest, to give him a fright he won't forget."

"No." Poppystar shook her head. "We agreed to attack tomorrow night, as long as the weather was better."

"But the clouds have cleared. Look!" Cherrytail backed away to the entrance to the den, and stood on the trail outside, his shape outlined against an almost full moon. He waved his tail at a sky glittering with the warriors of Silverpelt. "You couldn't hope for a better night than this."

"But the kittypets have gone home," Poppystar argued. "They promised to stay tomorrow night and help with the attack. We can't leave them out again, not when they were so upset about the fight against the rats."

Cherrytail twitched his tail impatiently. "That's their problem. This is the best night for attacking. We need as much light as possible."

Poppystar twitched her nose. "I suppose you're right," she admitted reluctantly.

But as she shook moss out of her fur and headed down the trail into the gorge, she couldn't shake off a nagging sense of guilt. She could imagine the shock and disappointment on the faces of the daylight

warriors when they heard that the attack had taken place without them. *What am I going to say to them? And will Leafdapple think that I lied to him?*

Cherrytail ran nimbly across the face of the cliff to rouse the warriors in their den, then led the way down to the river. Poppystar joined them near the foot of the Rockpile. The moon cast black shadows across the cliffs and turned the surface of the river to bubbling silver; every rock and tree stood out sharply against the wash of pale light. *Cherrytail was right. This is a good night to attack.* But deep inside, she still knew that this wasn't right.

Though no cat had called them, Birdpaw and Nettlepaw burst out of their den and raced down to join the warriors.

"Are you going now?" Nettlepaw panted, her eyes gleaming. "I want to come, too!"

"And me," Birdpaw added. "I want to teach that Twoleg a lesson, after what he did to our mother."

"Nettlepaw, you can certainly come," Poppystar replied. "But I'm not sure about you, Birdpaw. It's a long way. Will your leg hold out?"

"My leg is fine now!" the apprentice insisted.

"Echosong, what do you think?" Poppystar asked the medicine cat, who had padded up in time to hear the discussion.

Echosong twitched his ears. "I know how much this means to Birdpaw..." he began hesitantly. "I suppose he can go," he mewed at last. "But keep an eye on him, Poppystar, and if he starts limping, then take him out of the action."

Poppystar nodded. "I'll do that. And Birdpaw," she added sternly, "if I tell you to back off, you do it. No arguments, okay?"

"I'll keep an eye on him, too," Rainfur promised, shouldering her way through the throng of cats to stand beside her kits.

"You're sure you want to come?" Poppystar meowed, faintly surprised that the she-cat would be willing to return to the den

where she had been a prisoner for so long.

"You need me," Rainfur replied steadily. "I know that Twoleg and his nest better than any cat."

"True." Poppystar dipped her head in approval.

"I'll come, too," a shaky voice meowed.

Poppystar spun around to see Shrewtooth, who had crept up behind Echosong, a black shadow in the night. She was trembling, but there was determination in her gaze.

"Thanks, Shrewtooth, but there's no need," Poppystar responded. *Great Starclan! What if she panics like she did this morning?*

"But I want to. I don't want to be a coward anymore."

"No cat will call you a coward," Poppystar promised. "But we don't need every cat to come. Clovertail is going to stay behind to guard the camp, but he can't do it alone. What if the rats attacked Patchfoot and Waspwhisker and the kits?"

"Poppystar's right," Cherrytail added, with more sympathy for the young black she-cat than Poppystar had expected. "Guarding the camp is the most important job there is. We trust you, Shrewtooth."

The young warrior blinked and stood a little straighter. "Okay, Cherrytail. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," Cherrytail told her.

With a grateful glance at her deputy, Poppystar gathered the rest of her Clan together and led them over the Rockpile and up to the top of the cliff on the far side of the gorge. She noticed that all four newcomers had joined the patrol without any more protest, though they padded along in a tight group at the rear, their tension clear in the swift glances that cast from side to side, and the bristling of their fur.

What secrets are they hiding?

The wind had dropped and the night was warm and still. The only sounds were the soft paw steps of her Clanmates and the swish of ferns and grass as they brushed against well-groomed fur. *It would be a good night for a hunt,* Poppystar thought, not looking forward to what was coming.

As the Skyclan warriors crept across the border, Poppystar noticed that Rainfur was trembling. Slipping through the ferns to her side, she touched her nose briefly to the gray cat's ear. "If it gets too bad, you can go back," she murmured.

Rainfur shook her head. "I can do this, Poppystar," she vowed.

Poppystar padded alongside her to bolster her courage as they headed for the Twoleg den. *Did Thunderclan ever fight Twolegs?* she asked herself, wondering whether their starry ancestors were watching from the sky. *I should have asked Echosong if he had a sign from Starclan about this attack,* she thought with a stab of concern. But wouldn't Echosong have told her? If Starclan was silent, perhaps it meant that they were happy for Skyclan to make their own decision. Poppystar flicked her tail in frustration. Why did it always feel as if she was leading her Clan in the dark? All the stars in the sky didn't seem to give enough light to see where the future lay.

There was a soft hiss from Cherrytail as the patrol reached the edge of the clearing and halted under the trees opposite the Twoleg nest. It was dark and silent; Poppystar could almost believe the nest had been abandoned. *That would make everything much easier.*

"Right, this is it," Cherrytail whispered. "You all know what you have to do. Fallowfern, Cory, and Sharpclaw, go collect dead branches and brambles, and drag them outside the nest door as quietly as you can. We don't want to wake the dog and warn the Twoleg."

The three warriors, already primed from the earlier planning, twitched their ears in acknowledgement and melted into the shadows.

"Stumpy, Bouncefire, Rockshade," Cherrytail beckoned the next

group of cats with his tail. "You're the fastest runners, so you're going to lead the dog away. Get into position now."

"And make sure you have a good escape route," Poppystar added before the three cats could move. "Climb a tree if you need to. I don't want any cat getting hurt tonight."

"We *know* all this," Bouncefire muttered as she led the others away.

"We'll be careful, Poppystar," Stumpy mewed; her eyes were full of sympathy, as if she shared her Clan leader's misgivings.

"The rest of you, spread out around the clearing," Cherrytail went on. "And don't so much as twitch a whisker until you hear Poppystar's signal."

Poppystar crouched beneath the bushes at the edge of the Twoleg garden, her nose quivering at the rank smells that came from the den; scents of dog and rotting Twoleg waste drowned out the sweet night scents of grass and herbs. Moonhigh was close, and the silver light cast sharp-clawed shadows on the walls of the den.

There was a thick whispering sound. Sharpclaw, Fallowfern, and Cory crept across the open space, dragging branches and tendrils of bramble behind them. Her paws tingling with tension, Poppystar watched them make several trips back and forth from the edge of the wood until they had built a dense, bristling mound outside the door of the nest. Then they melted silently into the bushes. Now the only sounds Poppystar could hear were the faint rustling of leaves and the distant bark of a fox. Her warriors were in position. For a heartbeat her belly cramped as if she had eaten crow-food.

This is it.

"Attack!" she yowled, bunching her hindquarters underneath her and springing forward.

All around her the warriors of Skyclan burst out of the undergrowth and raced toward the Twoleg den. Their yowls split the still night air and sent birds crashing out of the trees with shrieks of alarm. Cherrytail was the first to reach the den. He leaped up onto the

narrow ledge outside the gap in the wall; his paws rattled the hard, transparent barrier as he battered at it. Poppystar, a pace behind him, jumped up to the gap on the other side of the door and hurled herself against it, feeling the transparent stuff shift in its crumbling wooden frame.

Tinycloud sprang up beside her, while Sparrowpelt and Rainfur bounded over the thorn barrier and raked their claws down the door in long, whistling scratches. Poppystar saw the light of battle in Rainfur's eyes; the light gray speckled she-cat's nerves had vanished now that the attack had begun. The rest of the Clan gathered close to the nest, wailing as they lashed their tails and dug their claws into the ground. Poppystar's misgivings returned; these looked like cats just waiting for a chance to slash at their enemy with claws and teeth. Would they be able to resist getting dangerously close to the Twoleg or his dog?

Her gaze met Cherrytail's; the deputy gave her a swift nod, and jumped down to join the warriors on the ground. "Remember we're only trying to scare the Twoleg," he yowled. "We don't want any injuries."

Suddenly light appeared in one of the gaps high up in the den wall, throwing a hard-edged yellow square onto the grass that trapped Nettlepaw and Birdpaw in the glare. The two apprentices crouched, frozen in shock.

"Get back!" Cherrytail screeched, waving his tail to urge his Clanmates away from the nest.

Poppystar repeated the signal. "Keep back! Hide!" she ordered.

The cats dashed for cover on either side of the nest, leaving a clear space in front of the door. Poppystar found herself crouching in a clump of ferns with Cory beside her. The black tom was shivering, his eyes wide and his gaze fixed on the light in the wall of the Twoleg den. Poppystar could hear crashing inside the nest and shouts from the Twoleg. The door flew open and the dog stood on the step, its tongue lolling. Poppystar shuddered. The dog's legs were long and bony, its muscles hard and stringy under its smooth pelt. Its small eyes glittered with moonlight as it stared around.

The cats behind the Twoleg nest fell silent, leaving a single eerie wail that came from the far end of the garden. Every hair on Poppystar's pelt prickled. *It even scares me, and I know what it is!* Poking her head out of the ferns she spotted Bouncefire, Stumpy, and Rockshade, blurry black shapes at the edge of the garden. There was a glint of pointed white teeth as Bouncefire stopped wailing and snapped shut her jaws.

"Come on, flea-pelt!" Rockshade dared the dog. "See if you can catch us!"

The Twoleg—still invisible inside the den—barked out what sounded like a command. The dog leaped over the thorn barrier and hurtled across the garden toward the three warriors.

Run! Now! Poppystar willed them silently.

To her horror, all three cats stayed still, hissing a challenge, until the dog was almost on them. Then they whipped around and raced through the broken-down fence toward the edge of the forest, with the dog hard on their paws.

Starclan, keep them safe! Poppystar prayed, losing sight of them as they led the dog deeper into the brambles.

When the dog had vanished, the remaining Skyclan warriors started yowling again. A heavy, shuffling movement in the doorway caught Poppystar's attention and she narrowed her eyes with cold anger as the old Twoleg who had tormented Rainfur and her kits loomed into view. Gathering his ragged pelts around him, the Twoleg let out an irritable snarl and stepped forward, right into the barrier of thorns. With a screech he toppled over as the branches snagged on his hind feet and sprawled forward onto his face. His hind paws got more and more tangled in the brambles while he flailed around with his forepaws, trying to get up.

When he managed to struggle upright, he held a branch clutched in one forepaw. Poppystar flinched from his anger and fear-scent as he glared around the clearing. Tinycloud slipped out from the shelter of a bush; the Twoleg staggered forward, swiping at him with the branch. Tinycloud dodged easily to one side. Then more cats began

to appear from their hiding places, racing over the grass with their ears flattened and their lips curled to show pointed teeth.

Not too close! Careful!

Rainfur, Nettlepaw, and Birdpaw stood directly in front of the Twoleg with their backs arched, hissing. Poppystar doubted the Twoleg would recognize them as the half-starved she-cat and her terrified kits who escaped from him two seasons ago. Rainfur spat vengeance and fury, and the apprentices beside her looked ready to tear the throats from a whole pack of foxes. Behind them, Fallowfern ripped at the grass with his claws, his lips drawn back in a snarl. Haze and Cinder stood close together; Poppystar could see the uncertainty in their eyes, and guessed that it wouldn't take much for them to turn tail and flee back to the safety of the trees. Sharpclaw and Sparrowpelt advanced side by side, hissing out their hatred as the Twoleg swung the branch at them.

With a growl from deep in her throat, Rainfur took one step forward. The Twoleg paused with the branch held high in the air and looked at her. Rainfur didn't blink. Instead, she took another step forward, this time lowering her front paws slowly so that the Twoleg could clearly see her long claws. A strange noise came from the Twoleg, a bit like a cough. He let the branch fall onto the ground beside him.

Poppystar sought out Cherrytail, and spotted him in the shadow of the nest, close to the wall. She curled her tail as a signal. *We must end this now, before some cat gets hurt.*

Cherrytail stalked out into the open and Poppystar joined him at the center of the ragged semicircle of cats. They had all fallen silent, their gaze fixed on the Twoleg, challenging him to raise the branch again.

"Leave us alone!" Poppystar yowled. She knew that the Twoleg wouldn't understand, but she spoke the words so that her own Clan could hear them, and hoped that her tone would be enough to warn the Twoleg. "Lay one paw on another cat and we'll do more than show you our claws."

The old Twoleg was letting out high-pitched whimpering sounds now. His hind legs had started to shake and one of his back paws twitched, knocking the branch into the heap of brambles. His fear-scent was rank as a fox. For a couple of heartbeats Poppystar felt sorry for him. Then she looked at Rainfur and her kits and remembered how weak and ill they had been, how close to death, when Sandstar had led the patrol that released them from the Twoleg's prison. And she remembered Shrewtooth's horror when she found herself back in the Twoleg's clearing.

The Twoleg deserves to feel as scared as these cats have been.

Poppystar waved her tail to tell her Clanmates that the attack was over. Moving as one, they spun around and raced off into the trees. A glance over her shoulder showed the old Twoleg stumbling back inside his den. The slam of the door echoed into the night.

Pride surged through Poppystar as she led her Clan back through the forest. They had just crossed the border when she heard panting and yelping coming from just ahead, and froze as the dog burst out from a clump of hazel saplings. Cherrytail shouldered his way to her side, his claws extended.

But the dog paid no attention to any cat, not even pausing to give them a sniff. With its tail between its legs, it fled back toward the Twoleg nest. Dark spots of blood dripped from its nose and spattered over the ground.

Yes! Poppystar thought as she started walking again, through moonlight that was sliced by the shadows of trees.

Skyclan has won!

Chapter 22

Poppystar and the rest of the cats caught up to Stumpy, Bouncefire, and Rockshade near the top of the cliff, so the whole patrol raced across the Rockpile hard on her paws and poured down into the camp.

"You're back!" Clovertail appeared out of the shadows near the fresh-kill pile, his white underbelly and legs shining pale in the half-light. "What happened?"

"Is any cat hurt?" Echosong called, bounding up from the direction of his den.

It was Cherrytail who replied. "No, we're all fine. And we gave that crow-food eating Twoleg a fright he won't forget in a hurry."

"That's great!" Clovertail exclaimed, his eyes gleaming. "You're all heroes!"

"What about the dog?" Shrewtooth mewed, peering out from behind Clovertail.

"I doubt the dog will bother us again," Poppystar told her. "We taught it a lesson, too."

"I clawed its nose," Bouncefire announced, pressing forward to give Shrewtooth a friendly nudge. "I wish you'd been there to see it."

Shrewtooth blinked. "I do, too."

"You shouldn't have been near enough to claw it!" Patchfoot scolded as she padded up with Waspwhisker and the kits. But her eyes glowed with pride as she gazed at her daughter, and she touched her shoulder approvingly with her tail.

"I can't believe we did it!" Sharpclaw panted. "We took on a Twoleg and we beat him!"

"If we can do that, we can do anything!" Tinycloud purred.

The cats crowded around the fresh-kill pile to choose a piece of prey while their Clanmates who had stayed behind hailed them with questions. Waspwhisker's kits bounced around gleefully, even though it was the middle of the night, getting under every cat's paws as they tried to act out what they imagined had gone on. As she waited to choose her own prey, Poppystar noticed that the four newest warriors had withdrawn a few tail-lengths, and were murmuring to one another with their heads close together. Her paws pricked with uneasiness. *Why don't they want to celebrate with us? It's their victory as much as any cat's.*

Trying to shrug off her nagging anxiety, Poppystar picked out a plump vole for herself. Seeing that her Clanmates were settling down while Cherrytail began to tell the full story of the attack, she carried her fresh-kill up the trail and sprang over the gap to reach the Skyrock.

The moon was close to setting but the stars of Silverpelt still shone brightly in an indigo sky. A soft breeze, laden with the scents of newleaf, whispered over the surface of the rock. Down below, the river was a silver snake winding among the rocks; Poppystar could just make out the dark huddle of cats at the foot of the Rockpile. She wondered if the spirits of her ancestors were looking down on them. *I hope they are.* She was proud of her warriors, the way they had carried out the plan to scare the Twoleg without putting themselves in danger, the courage they had shown in seeking vengeance on behalf of Shrewtooth and Rainfur. For once, Poppystar hadn't been in doubt that Skyclan was following the right path. But now the attack was over; the Twoleg had been given a fright that would hopefully keep him from torturing more cats in the future; and Poppystar felt herself staring into darkness once more.

She stopped eating with the vole half finished and padded to the very edge of the rock to lay it down. "An offering for the cats who walk the skies," she whispered. *Perhaps I should do this more often,* she thought. *Maybe our ancestors won't come down to share our fresh-kill, but at least they'll be able to see that they are not forgotten. We still hunt in their memory, surviving by their skills.*

Almost as if she had summoned it, she caught a whiff of cat scent and heard the soft pad of paws approaching her from behind. She turned to see Skywatcher stepping lightly through the air toward her, her pelt pure silver and her eyes shining like pools of starlight.

"Welcome," Poppystar murmured, dipping her head.

Skywatcher padded past her to sniff at the prey she had left at the edge of the rock. "A fine, plump creature," she commented, though she didn't eat.

"Skywatcher," Poppystar began hesitantly, "did you and... and the other warriors of Starclan see our attack on the Twoleg?"

Skywatcher's reply was a brief nod; Poppystar was disappointed when she didn't tell her what her Clanmates had thought of it. "We planned what we needed to do, and we did it," she meowed, feeling that she had to justify herself to the starry warrior. "Every cat was so brave! And the Twoleg deserved to be frightened. You know what he did to Rainfur and her kits, and to Shrewtooth."

"You certainly won that battle," Skywatcher grunted. "The Twoleg is good and scared, I'll give you that."

Poppystar flicked her tail, frustrated. "Did we do the right thing?" she blurted out.

Skywatcher gave her a long look from fathomless blue eyes. "Only time will tell," she mewed at last. "Twolegs aren't the usual sort of enemies for a Clan. They don't steal prey or threaten borders like other cats, and they don't kill kits like foxes or badgers."

"Then have I broken the warrior code?" Poppystar whispered in dismay. "Was I wrong to take a battle to a Twoleg nest?"

To her relief, Skywatcher shook her head, scattering starlight around them. "You are the leader of Skyclan," she pointed out. "You must have confidence in what you do. If the Twoleg was a threat to your Clan, then you were right to attack."

He certainly was a threat, but still... "I just want to know what the other Clans would have done," she confessed.

"But you are not the other Clans." The silver glow in Skywatcher's fur blazed out strongly and then began to fade. "You must find your own path."

Her outline grew fainter, until it was no more than a glitter of stardust against the rock, and then was gone.

Poppystar remained staring at the place where she had stood. She still felt troubled. How could she find a path for Skyclan when there were no obvious choices to take? *I hope I made the right decisions tonight. I wish I could be sure...*

When Poppystar returned to the gorge the Clan was still feasting and sharing tongues around the bottom of the Rockpile. She was relieved to see that the four newcomers had joined the others and were sharing prey.

Cherrytail padded over to meet her at the foot of the trail. "We did well tonight," he remarked, twitching his whiskers in satisfaction. "The Clan feels strong and united."

"That's true," Poppystar murmured.

"The attack on the Twoleg has brought us all together," her deputy went on. "You see, we don't really need the kitty warriors at all."

Poppystar gazed at him, her mouth open in shock. *Does he resent the daylight warriors so much?* She and Cherrytail had worked well together during the attack, reinforcing each other's leadership, reading silent signals to keep their Clanmates safe and focused. But now the old divisions were reappearing. Unable to find a reply, Poppystar turned her back on her deputy and stalked off to her den.

The sound of cheerful yowling outside woke Poppystar the next morning. Yawning, she scrambled out of her nest, wincing at the stiffness in her muscles from the trek through the forest and the attack. She felt as though she hadn't slept for more than a couple of heartbeats, but when she padded to the entrance of her den she saw that the sun had risen above the gorge; warm light slanted over the

rocks and glittered on the surface of the river.

Five cats were tumbling over the rim of the gorge and racing down the trail, calling out greetings as they came. Seeing Poppystar, Leafdapple halted and waved his tail. "We're here! We're ready for the attack!"

Poppystar felt her heart drop down into her paws. *What am I going to tell them?* She began to make her way across the cliff face toward Leafdapple and the others, setting her paws down carefully on the narrow trail. But before she reached them, Sharpclaw popped her head out of the warriors' den, a few tail-lengths below where the daylight warriors had halted.

"You're too late!" the dark ginger tabby she-cat announced. "We attacked last night, and it went really well!"

Poppystar flinched. *If I'd had the chance, I would have been a bit more tactful than that!*

"What?" Cobaltclaw arched his back and let out a hiss of annoyance. "You went without us?"

The usually gentle Frecklepaw flicked his tail, looking as angry as his mentor.

Harleymoon and Amber glanced at each other with indignation in their eyes. "Hey, I was looking forward to that!" Harleymoon exclaimed.

"Yeah, I made my Twolegs give me more food, just so I'd be ready," Amber agreed.

"I'm sorry," Poppystar meowed as she reached Leafdapple's side. "Come down by the river, where I can explain properly."

More cats were emerging from their dens as Poppystar led the way down into the gorge and found a sun-warmed stone near the water's edge where she could sit and talk to the daylight warriors. She was aware of their hostile looks and bristling fur as they gathered around her. She was grateful to see Cherrytail padding up to join her, though less so when Sharpclaw, Tinycloud, and Fallowfern

bounded after him and sat down on the edge of the group.

We've got the makings of a serious split in the Clan here, unless I'm careful.

"I can't believe you didn't wait for us!" Cobaltclaw burst out, before Poppystar had the chance to speak. "We planned it all so carefully."

"Yeah, why did you leave us out?" Harleymoon demanded.

"I'm sorry," Poppystar began. She sympathized too much with the kittypets to be able to justify herself convincingly. "We needed a clear night for the attack, and after the clouds disappeared—"

"That's right," Cherrytail chipped in. "We couldn't be sure when we would get another chance."

Leafdapple glanced up at the cloudless blue sky and flicked his ears, though he said nothing. Embarrassment flooded through Poppystar, making her pelt itch. She could see that tonight promised to be just as clear as the night before; they could easily have waited for the kittypets. *But we didn't know that.*

"You know, you kittypets want to have it both ways," Tinycloud meowed, stepping forward with his head thrust out aggressively. "You spend time here in the Clan, but then you shove off to your Twoleg nests for strokes and soft beds."

"It shouldn't be like that," Sharpclaw agreed. "When Sandstar was here, he told us we had to choose, and that's what we did."

"But Sandstar isn't here anymore." Harleymoon pointed out, swinging her head around to glare at Tinycloud and his sister.

"The warrior code hasn't changed," Tinycloud countered. "You have to be a proper Clan cat if you want to be included in everything."

Cobaltclaw jumped to his paws. "Are you saying that we're *not* proper Clan cats?" he demanded, his tail lashing.

"You tell me," Tinycloud growled. "Do proper Clan cats eat Twoleg food? Do they purr around Twolegs and beg to be stroked?"

Poppystar's belly churned as the quarrel she had dreaded erupted; more of the Clan cats were clustering around now, and there were more glares aimed at the daylight warriors.

"This isn't right," Leafdapple meowed. He was calmer than the rest, but there was a bitter edge in his voice. "We train and hunt with you, but when there's anything important going on, you don't want us. You left us out of the rat attack, and now this."

"And we managed fine without you, thanks," Sharpclaw flashed back at him.

Before Poppystar could say anything, Cherrytail shouldered his way between the hostile cats.

"That's enough," he growled. "The attack happened, it's over, and that's the end of it. Next time we plan something," he added, "you kittypets might make more effort to be here."

Tinycloud blinked in satisfaction, but Poppystar was appalled by the unfairness of Cherrytail's comment. He almost seemed to be deliberately setting the gorge-based cats against the daylight warriors.

He wouldn't try to make the full Clan cats drive them out, would he? That would split the Clan forever!

"We're sorry it happened like this," Poppystar repeated, rising to her paws. 'We made what we thought was the right decision at the time. Now let's put it behind us."

As she spoke, she spotted Cherrytail glaring at her, as if by apologizing she was showing signs of weakness. *My Clan, my decisions,* she told herself.

"It's past time to set the patrols," she reminded Cherrytail tartly. "Or are we going to sit around in the gorge all day?"

The cats were still grumbling as the deputy sorted them into patrols, and Poppystar guessed it would be a long time before their ruffled feelings were forgotten. At least Cherrytail had the sense to include all the kittypets in the first set of patrols, though he didn't

ask any of them to lead.

"Rainfur, you and Fallowfern can take you apprentices and give them some hunting training," he ordered. "Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw, go with them. Leafdapple, you too. No sign yet of Snookpaw?" he asked after a moment's pause.

Leafdapple shook his head. "I went by her nest on my way here this morning," he replied. "But everything was shut up and quiet."

"She's missing a lot of training," Cherrytail commented.

Poppystar wondered if Leafdapple would take offense at the veiled criticism, but the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom just dipped his head in agreement. "I'll make sure she catches up when she comes back."

"See that you do," Cherrytail mewed.

Rainfur took her patrol toward the trail that led up the cliff. After hesitating for a moment, Poppystar decided to follow. It had been a while since she had observed the apprentices in training, but what she really wanted to see was how the full Clan cats and the daylight warriors worked together after the earlier tension.

When Poppystar reached the top of the cliff, she spotted Rainfur leading the patrol toward the nearest thicket, the apprentices barely visible in the long grass. As Poppystar bounded up to join them, she heard Nettlepaw's voice raised boastfully.

"We really scared that old Twoleg! You should have seen us."

"And heard us," Birdpaw added. "We yowled so loud, I'm surprised we didn't wake you up in your Twoleg nests!"

Poppystar stiffened. Had the apprentices no sense at all, to taunt the daylight warriors by bragging about the attack? Cobaltclaw's tail-tip was flicking irritably from side to side; Frecklepaw was looking sulky, and Leafdapple opened his jaws to speak, then obviously thought better of it.

"You kittypets missed an awesome patrol!" Nettlepaw continued.

Poppystar's paws itched to intervene, but it was up to the mentors to discipline their apprentices. She was surprised that neither Rainfur nor Fallowfern said a word. *They probably feel the same,* she thought, biting back an angry comment.

"This patrol is too big for a successful hunt," she meowed, padding up to join the others. "Leafdapple, why don't you come with me? Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw, too."

"Good idea." Leafdapple responded instantly, with a flash of understanding in his amber eyes.

As he spoke, Poppystar spotted Nettlepaw and Birdpaw exchanging a glance, their eyes gleaming. *Now what's their problem?* she wondered, but neither apprentice said anything.

Rainfur nodded in reply to Poppystar's suggestion, and led her remaining patrol farther into the thicket. Poppystar turned the other way, along the top of the cliff in the direction of the Twolegplace. She could feel the relief among the daylight warriors as they followed her, and she wondered bleakly if her Clanmates would ever learn to work together.

"Right," she began as they approached a stretch of bushes and thick undergrowth. "What I'd like to try today is working out ways of hunting as a group. We all do better if we cooperate. We—"

She broke off as Echosong emerged from some close-growing stems of fern with a bundle of herbs in his mouth. The medicine cat blinked with barely concealed surprise as he saw Poppystar's patrol, and padded up to his Clan leader.

"Can I have a word with you?" he meowed, laying his bundle down.

"Of course." Poppystar glanced at Leafdapple. "Take the others into the bushes and see what you can find."

Leafdapple flicked his ears in acknowledgement, and vanished among the undergrowth with Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw hard on his paws. Poppystar noticed that Frecklepaw glanced regretfully over his shoulder at Echosong as the ferns closed behind him.

"Well?" Poppystar prompted, fully prepared for Echosong to raise the question of an apprentice again.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Echosong queried. Poppystar blinked at him in surprise. "I know there was trouble this morning," the medicine cat went on, "but you won't solve it by keeping the daylight warriors separate from the others."

Poppystar hadn't noticed Echosong among the cats beside the river that morning, but he obviously knew all about the quarrel. "What else can I do?" she protested. "Wait until they start clawing one another's ears off?"

"I don't know," Echosong admitted. "But splitting the cats up won't help the tension in the Clan. In the end, it'll make them worse."

Poppystar had a grudging feeling that her Clanmate was right. 'Then what's the answer? I don't want to turn any cat away, but allowing daylight warriors—okay, *kittypets*—into the Clan obviously isn't working." She lowered her head, feeling as if dark storm clouds had rolled across the sky to blot out the sun. "I sometimes wonder if Sandstar was right to give me the leadership of Skyclan."

"That's mouse-brained," Echosong mewed briskly. "*Starclan* chose you as our leader, not Sandstar. And I know that there's no cat in the Clan who could do it better. But Poppystar, you—" he broke off.

Poppystar wondered what the young tom wasn't telling her. "Go on," she prompted. "Say what you want to say."

Echosong shook his head. "Nothing... nothing, really. Just—Poppystar, be careful of your own feelings, that's all."

He picked up his bundle of herbs and padded off toward the top of the trail, leaving his Clan leader staring blankly after him.

Be careful of my own feelings? What did he mean by that?

Chapter 23

"What do you mean, the Twolegs took Tracy?" Haze spat, scraping his claws on the hard stone of the Twoleg alley.

Winter's ears were laid flat to her head with horror and distress. "She couldn't run fast enough. They just grabbed her!" he wailed.

"I'm sorry!" Cory panted, bounding up with Cinder to join Stumpy and Winter. "There wasn't anything we could do to stop them."

Cinder's neck fur was bristling and she drew her lips back in a snarl. "This means war!" she declared.

Stumpy nodded. "It's mouse-brained to think that we can live alongside Twolegs. They're our enemies!"

Haze narrowed his eyes. "It's not the Twolegs," he growled. "This is all Swift's fault."

"What do you mean?" Cory meowed.

Haze told them about the time he had come upon Shelly and Bear torturing the rabbit in the Twoleg garden. A shudder ran through him as he remembered his dream, his paws clogged with blood and fur. "The Twolegs won't let cats attack their rabbits. I think Swift arranged this so the Twolegs would drive us out."

"But aren't we going to fight for our home?" Cinder hissed, her claws rasping against the smooth gray stones that lined the alley.

"Of course we are," Haze retorted. "But not against the Twolegs. Swift and her cats are the ones we have to fight."

"I'll rip their fur off," Cinder snarled. "I'll—hey!" she mewed, breaking off. "Where's Harper? Did the Twolegs take her as well?"

"Harper's fine," Haze growled. "She got away." Before his friends could ask any more questions, he went on, "So how can we attack

Swift and her cats? Any ideas?"

The others looked at one another.

"It would be easier if we knew where they sleep," Cory commented.

"But we don't," Stumpy meowed.

Haze realized how clever Swift had been. She had taken over the hunting grounds that Haze and his friends had thought of as their own, but she had given nothing away. *The crow-food eating mangebag has always stayed one step ahead.* "Then find them!" he snapped.

"Do you want to wait until Harper comes back?" Stumpy asked.

"No!" Haze wasn't sure that she was coming back. "We don't need her."

His friends exchanged uneasy looks before heading off in different directions.

"No, *I'll* go that way," Haze ordered Winter, shouldering the white tom away from the direction Harper had taken. "You climb the wall and search behind the Twoleg nests."

"Okay." Winter was obviously surprised, but he leaped the wall without arguing and disappeared down the other side.

Shame flooded over Haze as he retraced his steps toward the place where he had confronted Harper. He couldn't tell the others that his daughter had betrayed them all. *She must have told Red where we slept, and helped Swift plan the Twoleg raid.*

Reaching the shed where he had confronted Harper and Red, he picked up his daughter's scent and followed it around the next corner. Her scent mingled closely with Red's, he noticed with disgust. Scrambling over a low, sloping roof, Haze dropped down into the next alley. He had barely begun following the scent trail again when he heard paw steps thundering up behind him.

Haze froze, then spun around to see Cory bounding along the alley.

"I can't let you go off on your own," the black tom panted as he halted in front of Haze. "It's madness!"

"I'm fine," Haze growled. "And you make so much noise, you couldn't creep up on a fox with no ears."

Whipping around, he carried on up the alley, only to realize that Cory was keeping pace with him. "I told you, I'm fine!"

Cory halted again, his amber eyes fixed on Haze. "I've known you too long, old friend," he meowed. "What's wrong?"

Haze couldn't hold his gaze. "It's Harper," he muttered, turning his head away. "I... I think she betrayed us to Swift."

Though he wasn't looking at Cory, he heard his friend's gasp of horror. "I don't believe it!" Cory protested. "Harper would never do that."

"Well, maybe she would. Her mother didn't show much loyalty, did she?"

There was a furious hiss from Cory. "You know exactly why Twig did what she did. Harper may have her mother's pride and stubbornness, but she gets that from her father as well!" More gently, he added, "You've always been proud that your daughter knows her own mind."

"I'm not sure if she does know her own mind anymore," Haze muttered. "She always—"

He broke off as he spotted a whisk of movement underneath a straggling bush a few fox-lengths away, its roots sinking down into the gap left by a broken paving stone. Bounding up to the bush, Haze paused for a heartbeat to check the scent. *Enemy!* He plunged through the twisted branches and sank his teeth into the scruff of a black and silver tom who was crouching in a gap between the branches and the wall.

"One of Swift's lot," he mumbled through a mouthful of fur as he dragged him into the open.

He let the tom go, but kept him pinned down with a paw slammed onto his neck. "What's your name?" he snarled.

The tom looked too shocked to struggle. "I—I'm called Chive," he stammered.

"Hey, don't be too harsh," Cory protested, padding up to join them.

Haze ignored him. He slid out his claws until he felt their tips pricking into Chive's skin through his pelt. "Tell me where Swift is!"

Chive opened his jaws to speak, but only choking sounds came out. Haze realized that he was squashing his neck. He raised his paw a fraction, but as soon as the pressure eased, Chive reared up, trying to throw him off. Haze flung himself on top of him and crushed him under his weight. He pushed his face close to his; fierce satisfaction rushed through him when he saw the fear in his green eyes. He raised one paw, ready to slice his claws through his neck.

"Haze, no!" Cory pushed Haze's raised paw aside. "What are you doing? You can't kill him!"

"Yes, I can!" Haze spat. "But I won't. You, mange-pelt, tell me where Swift is."

The tom's breath came fast and shallow with terror; underneath his paw, Haze could feel the frantic beating of his heart.

"She's by the stream," he gabbled out. "Behind the Twoleg nests. She sleeps in some old boxes... Let me go, please!"

A red mist of fury swirled through Haze's mind. He flexed his claws, yearning to slice them through Chive's flesh.

"Haze!" Cory's voice cut through his anger. "He's told us what we need to know. Now let him go."

There was a grim note in his friend's voice that Haze couldn't ignore. Gradually the mist faded. He sheathed his claws and rose to his paws, releasing Chive, who fled down the alley with his tail streaming behind him. Once he had disappeared, Haze turned and headed in the direction of the stream.

"Haze, wait!" Cory planted himself in front of his friend. "What are you going to do? You can't attack on your own."

Haze breathed deeply. He knew that he was a whisker away from hurling himself on his friend with his claws outstretched if the black tom didn't get out of his way.

"Has this become personal?" Cory pressed, his gaze steady. "Is it about Harper?" When Haze didn't reply, he went on, "Swift can't steal Harper away, you know. She's not helpless, and she wouldn't stand for it."

"I know that," Haze growled. *If she's joined Swift, it's because she wants to.*

"Then this might be a battle you can't win," Cory warned. "Focus on what's really at stake here: our safety and our right to hunt."

"You're right. We'll collect the others, and come back to fight."

Cory blinked. "What, even if that means fighting Harper?"

"So be it," Haze responded grimly.

Cory gaped at him. "You don't mean that." Haze didn't reply, and after a few heartbeats, Cory went on, "I think you should go talk to Twig. She might know what Harper's doing, and she might be able to change her mind before it's too late."

Haze stared at his friend. "Twig is dead to me."

"No, she's not." Cory faced up to his friend with more courage than Haze had expected. "She never has been, and she never will be. You think of her every time you look at Harper." He took a pace forward so that he and Haze were nose to nose. "She's your daughter's mother, Haze. Go to her; ask her for help. She might be your only chance to save Harper."

Chapter 24

"Snookpaw!" Poppystar rose to her paws to greet the apprentice as she padded down the trail behind Leafdapple. "It's good to see you again."

A few sunrises had passed since the raid on the Twoleg nest, but Poppystar was still sharply aware of tension within the Clan. The cats were milling around her now, where she stood at the foot of the Rockpile while Cherrytail set the patrols. Morning mist still lay over the river, and the air was damp, promising rain later.

"Cobaltclaw, I want you to lead a hunting patrol," Cherrytail meowed. "Take Frecklepaw, of course, and... let's see... Bouncefire and Tinycloud."

Poppystar was agreeably surprised to hear Cherrytail putting a daylight warrior at the head of a patrol. Then she wondered whether her deputy had a hidden motive. Tinycloud was one of the best hunters in the Clan, and he had been loud in his criticisms of the kittypets. *Does Cherrytail hope Cobaltclaw will fail, and Tinycloud will have to take over?* Poppystar let her gaze rest on her deputy, his gleaming tortoiseshell and white pelt and sharp green eyes. *I know he's a strong deputy—but I can't help wondering whether he's trying to stir things up!*

"It's great to be back," Snookpaw meowed as she reached the bottom of the trail and padded over to Poppystar. "I've really missed the Clan."

Poppystar dipped her head. "We've missed you, too. Are you all right now?"

"I'm fine. I—" Snookpaw broke off to cough, and Poppystar looked at her in alarm. "No, I'm really fine," she assured her when she got her breath back. "I can't wait to start training again. But I can't stay all day," she added, stifling another cough. "My housefolk would be really worried."

Her love and respect for her Twolegs shone in his eyes. Poppystar felt a sudden pang, wondering what it would be like to live with housefolk. The Clan cats who accused the daylight warriors of choosing a life of comfort were wrong. There could be real affection between a kittypet and their Twolegs. *Are we wrong to expect them to give that up?*

Snookpaw trotted away to join Leafdapple, who was waiting for Cherrytail to give him an assignment. As she watched the patrols beginning to move off, Poppystar's eyes twitched at the sound of excited squeaking. She turned to see Waspwhisker's kits stalking up to Patchfoot, who lay dozing on a rock near the stream with one paw lying protectively over her swollen belly.

"That's a *huge* Twoleg!" Mintkit squealed. "We have to scare him off, or he'll attack the camp."

"I'm going to be Cherrytail!" Sandykit announced. "I'll lead the attack!"

"But *I* want to be Cherrytail!" Flamekit charged into his sister, pushing her over in a flurry of paws and tail. "Anyway, you're a she-cat, mouse-brain. You can't be Cherrytail."

"Can too," Sandykit muttered, then changed her mind with a whisk of her tail. "Okay, I'll be Stumpy."

"And I'll be Haze!" Creekkit announced. "He's a great warrior. What about you, Mintkit?"

"I'm going to be Leafdapple," Mintkit mewed. "He knows *everything* about fighting."

"You can't be Leafdapple." Sandykit stared scornfully at her brother. "He's not a real warrior."

"Yeah, he's a kittypet," Flamekit agreed with a contemptuous flick of his tail.

"He wasn't even at the raid," Creekkit pointed out. "So you can't be him."

Poppystar listened in growing alarm. *Have the kits forgotten the way Leafdapple taught them? Have even the* kits *picked up this tension between the daylight warriors and the full Clan cats?*

"I don't care!" Mintkit defended himself stoutly. "I still want to be Leafdapple."

"Then you can go and be him by yourself." Sandykit meowed, giving her littermate a push. "You're not playing with us if you want to be a *kittypet*."

She turned her back on Mintkit and pattered over the rocks toward Flamekit and Creekkit, who had crouched down and were starting to creep up on Patchfoot once more.

Mintkit watched for a heartbeat, then flicked his ears. "Okay, I'll be Tinycloud." He ran to join his littermates and dropped into a crouch beside Creekkit.

As Poppystar watched, she became aware of a cat standing beside her, and turned to see Leafdapple. Embarrassment flooded over her when she realized that he must have heard every word of the kits' game. "I—I'm so sorry..." she stammered.

Leafdapple shrugged. "What they say is true," he murmured. "I wasn't part of the raid."

Poppystar winced at the edge beneath his calm voice. She didn't want to quarrel with Leafdapple.

To her relief, the mottled pale brown and cream tabby tom said nothing else about the raid. "I'm leading a hunting patrol," he told her. "Cherrytail thought you might like to join us. Snookpaw and Sharpclaw are coming, too."

"That would be great." Poppystar felt a tingle in her paws at the thought of hunting with Leafdapple and the others. *I spend too much time in camp,* she thought. *It makes me see too many problems.*

There was a startled screech from Patchfoot as the tiny raiding part pounced. Leaving Waspwhisker to rescue her denmate from the kits, Poppystar followed Leafdapple up the trail that led into the woods.

Snookpaw and Sharpclaw brought up the rear.

"You can't hunt birds in the same way as squirrels, mouse-brain," Sharpclaw was telling the apprentice. "They have wings!"

"Well, they both hide in trees," Snookpaw argued. "So leaping up and stalking them along the branches will work for both."

"Maybe..." Sharpclaw admitted reluctantly. Poppystar was pleased to hear that while she sounded as bossy as usual when she was talking to an apprentice, she wasn't being unfair on her daylight Clanmate. "You have to be really careful when you jump on them, though."

Poppystar left them to their debate and picked up her pace until she was padding beside Leafdapple. "I'm truly sorry about the raid," she mewed quietly. "We should have waited for you. I promise you, it won't happen again. In the future we—"

"I understand why you did it," Leafdapple interrupted. "I don't bear you any ill will." He paused for a heartbeat to taste the air for prey, then added, "I know we're in an odd position, living with a paw in both worlds. Maybe the time is coming for us all to make a choice."

Poppystar found that her heart was suddenly beating faster. *What if he decides to go back to his housefolk?* "Which would you choose?" she whispered.

"It's so hard," Leafdapple responded with a sigh. His amber gaze was fixed on a tiny beetle as it climbed up a grass stem a mouse-length from his nose. "I love my housefolk, and they're kind to me. I know they make my life much easier than it would be if I lived in the Clan all the time." He took a deep breath, swinging his head around so that his warm gaze fell on Poppystar. "But I could never leave you," he murmured.

Poppystar's heart beat faster still, and the forest blurred around her into a chaos of green and gold. "I would never want you to," she breathed.

Her muzzle touched Leafdapple's, and she felt her tail twining with

his.

"Stop!"

At Sharpclaw's yowl, Poppystar leaped back. Leafdapple sprang away from her, his eyes startled and his fur beginning to fluff up defensively. But when Poppystar spotted Sharpclaw among the long grasses, the dark ginger tabby she-cat had her back to them. She was talking to a cream-colored she-cat who looked vaguely familiar. It was crouched in the shade of a straggly bush, much closer to the camp than when Poppystar had seen her before.

"Why are you in our territory?" Snookpaw demanded, shouldering her way through the ferns to confront the loner. "Didn't you smell our border scent marks?"

The she-cat flattened her ears to her head and showed the whites of her eyes.

"Back off a bit, Snookpaw," Poppystar ordered. "But she's right," she added to the she-cat. "You were given the chance to join Skyclan and you turned it down. So now you have to stay out of our territory."

The loner ducked her head awkwardly. "I know," she meowed. "But I've changed my mind. I'd like to join your Clan, if you'll still have me. My name's Egg."

"What made you change your mind?" Leafdapple padded up beside Poppystar, suspicion glinting in his amber eyes. "It's a bit sudden, isn't it?"

Egg blinked rapidly, as if she wasn't sure how to answer Leafdapple's question. Poppystar's paws tingled; she didn't want to put off a possible new warrior by interrogating her. After all, she'd seen this cat move through the trees, and she clearly had natural hunting skills.

"The offer still stands if you can prove your loyalty to Skyclan," she told her.

"Sure. Of course I can." Egg's blue eyes lit up with eagerness. "Can I

start now?"

Poppystar turned to Leafdapple. "Can you take the hunting patrol from here, while I take Egg back to the camp?"

Leafdapple looked undecided, with another uneasy glance toward Egg. "I'll come with you if you want."

Warmth spread through Poppystar at the thought that Leafdapple wanted to protect her, even while her paws prickled in protest. *I'm Clan leader; I don't need protection!*

"I'll be fine," she mewed briskly, then added more gently, "I'll see you later. Maybe we could go hunting together another time?"

As she spoke, she spotted Sharpclaw and Snookpaw staring at her in wide-eyed amazement. Her embarrassment flooded back. She didn't wait for Leafdapple to reply. "Come on," she ordered Egg, with a whisk of her tail. "It's this way."

As they headed back to the gorge, Poppystar noticed how jumpy she was, leaping into the air at every rustle from the undergrowth. She was almost as spooked as Shrewtooth. *Maybe she's been hurt by a Twoleg, too?*

"Why did you change your mind about joining us?" she asked, trying to make her tone unthreatening.

"Well... er... it just made sense," Egg stammered, still sounding as if the question bothered him.

At that moment they arrived at the top of the trail, and there was no chance for Poppystar to question him any more. Egg followed her down the trail; glancing back over her shoulder from time to time, Poppystar saw her eyes stretch with interest as she saw the activity in the camp: Lichenfur and Tangle washing themselves on a rock; Sparrowpelt and Rockshade dropping prey on the fresh-kill pile; other cats crowding around Cherrytail as he sorted out more patrols.

By the time Poppystar and Egg reached the bottom of the gorge, Cherrytail was heading toward the training area with Rainfur,

Fallowfern, and their apprentices. He paused, his ears pricked, as Poppystar padded up to him.

"This is Egg," Poppystar announced. "She's decided that she wants to join Skyclan. Egg, this is Cherrytail, the Clan deputy."

Egg dipped her head politely.

"We're glad to have you!" Cherrytail's green eyes glowed. "We're just going for some battle training. Do you want to come with us?"

Egg's tail shot right up in the air. "Great!"

"Come on, then." Cherrytail led the way up the gorge.

Poppystar was about to follow when her deputy looked back and gave his whiskers a dismissive twitch. "We'll be fine, thanks."

At first Poppystar began to bristle, her claws flexing in annoyance. *Am I Clan leader, or has Cherrytail taken over?* Then she figured that her deputy probably didn't want her breathing down his neck the whole time. He was perfectly capable of handling a training session.

I think I'll ask Cherrytail to mentor Egg, she thought as she turned back toward her den. *I know Egg is more than six moons old, but she'll need to go through an apprenticeship to learn all the ways of the Clan.*

In spite of a spatter of rain in the air, she felt warm as she padded back to her den. She was happy to have such a promising new addition to the Clan, especially when she had inherited the powerful legs and jumping skills of the old Skyclan. Letting her gaze travel around the camp, Poppystar watched Lichenfur and Tangle fluff up their fur against the rain and snatch a piece of fresh-kill before plodding back to their den; Echosong was returning with a mouthful of herbs; Waspwhisker's kits protested loudly as their mother tried to herd them back to the nursery.

And Leafdapple will be back soon... Everything would be perfect if he decided to live here all the time.

Chapter 25

Poppystar dozed in her den until sunhigh. By then the shower was over and the sky had cleared; the rocks steamed as the hot sunlight sucked up the rain. Looking down into the gorge, Poppystar saw that most of the cats had returned from patrol. Cherrytail and Egg were sitting together near the fresh-kill pile, talking with their heads close together as they ate. Haze and Stumpy were with them, too.

Egg seems to be settling in well, Poppystar thought.

She ran lightly down the trail into the gorge and jumped onto the Rockpile. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting," she yowled.

Most of the Clan were already there, glancing up curiously at Poppystar poised on top of the rocks. Tangle and Lichenfur emerged from their nests, their fur rumpled with sleep. Echosong appeared from his den and padded up to listen.

"We have a new Clanmate," Poppystar announced, angling her ears to where Egg sat beside Cherrytail. "Egg has decided to join us, and will become an apprentice today." With her tail she beckoned Egg forward until she stood alone at the foot of the Rockpile. "From this day forward," she went on, "this apprentice will be known as Eggpaw. Cherrytail, you are a brave and skillful warrior, and I know you will pass on these qualities to your apprentice."

Cherrytail showed no surprise in being named Egg's mentor. He dipped his head to Poppystar, then padded over to Egg and touched noses with her.

"Eggpaw! Eggpaw!" the Clan cats yowled, crowding around the new apprentice to congratulate her. Tinycloud and Rockshade looked particularly pleased, pressing up close to her and burying their muzzles in her shoulder fur.

Poppystar spotted Leafdapple on the edge of the crowd; he had called out Egg's name to welcome her, but he still looked slightly doubtful. Poppystar reminded herself to ask what was worrying him when she had the chance.

As the yowls of welcome died down, Egg looked up at Poppystar where she still stood on the Rockpile. "Er... Poppystar. Eggpaw's an okay name, but if you don't mind I'd like to stay as Egg. Haze said that's what he and his friends did."

Poppystar's tail-tip twitched. She didn't like the way that Haze and the other newcomers didn't think that warrior names were important, and she was even more annoyed that they were spreading their opinion throughout the Clan. *Names matter. They're part of who we are as warriors.*

The Clan waited in tense silence for their leader to make her decision, while Egg gazed up at her, blinking cheerfully as if she had no idea that she had said anything wrong. With an effort Poppystar hid her irritation. There was no point in putting Egg off right at the beginning of her apprenticeship. *Maybe when she's been with us for a while she'll be ready for a warrior name.*

"If that's what you want," she replied evenly. She was relieved when none of the Clan cats argued, though she saw Snookpaw lean over to say something to Leafdapple, and she caught the young cat's murmur. "I think Egg should be proud to have her apprentice name!"

Poppystar's paws were itching; she jumped down from the Rockpile and made her way over to Cherrytail and Egg as the crowd around them broke up. "I missed out on hunting this morning," she meowed. "Do you want to come out with me now? Cobaltclaw, you and Frecklepaw can join us."

"Good idea," Cherrytail replied, while Egg kneaded the ground in front of her in excitement. "Egg will get an idea of how Skyclan cats hunt."

Poppystar headed for the bottom of the trail, weaving a path through Waspwhisker's kits, who were wrestling together near the

foot of the Rockpile. But before she had gone more than a few paw steps, she heard Echosong calling her name, and waited for the medicine cat to catch up to her.

"Can Frecklepaw help me find herbs this afternoon?" Echosong puffed. "There's no cat in the medicine den right now, and I want to build up my supplies for when Patchfoot has her kits."

Trying to ignore the eager light in Frecklepaw's eyes, Poppystar shook her head. "Echosong, we've already discussed this," she meowed. "Frecklepaw is Cobaltclaw's apprentice, and he needs to keep up with his patrol duties."

"But I *need* an apprentice," Echosong protested, his ears flicking back in frustration.

"Well, then, wait until Waspwhisker's kits are old enough," Poppystar suggested. "It won't be long."

"What?" Sandykit sat up suddenly, twitching her tail away from Flamekit. "I don't want to be a medicine cat!"

"Neither do I," Mintkit agreed, scrambling to his paws from where he had been rolling Creekkit in the dust. "It's stinky and yucky!"

"And *boring*!" Flamekit added.

"We're going to be warriors," Creekkit announced, scrambling to her paws and drawing her lips back in an attempt at a fierce snarl. "I'm going to be Clan leader."

"No you're not, I am!" Sandykit hurled herself at her sister.

Creekkit dodged and ran off; her littermates followed her, squealing at the tops of their voices. Poppystar sighed. *None of them will ever make a medicine cat,* she admitted to herself.

Echosong dug his claws into the ground while his gaze traveled around the listening Clan. Poppystar realized he was angry that most of the Clan had heard the argument, and found himself struggling not to show it.

"We'll discuss this later," the medicine cat hissed. "I don't want to hold up your hunting patrol."

Poppystar felt close to despair as she watched Echosong stalk away. *We were so close once.*

As the patrol headed up the trail and into the woods, Frecklepaw lagged behind. "I wanted to stay and held Echosong," he complained.

"Well, you can't." Cobaltclaw sounded cross and frustrated, and Poppystar couldn't blame him. "You're my apprentice, and you need to train."

"I don't want to have a stupid training session."

Poppystar guessed that Frecklepaw hadn't meant his mentor to hear his last muttered comment, but the black tom's ears were sharp.

"I'm not too keen, either!" he snapped, giving his apprentice a sharp flick over the ear with his tail. "Now stop moaning and concentrate!"

Poppystar spotted Cherrytail rolling his eyes. "Both of you need to concentrate," he meowed. "Carry on like that, and you'll scare away all the prey between here and the Twolegplace."

Cobaltclaw lashed his tail but said nothing. Relieved that she didn't have to step in to end the quarrel, Poppystar led the way deeper into the woodland, picking up the strong scent of squirrel.

It was Cherrytail who spotted it first. "Over there," he whispered, angling his ears to where the squirrel was crossing a clearing just ahead of them in a series of short bounces. "Aren't we lucky?" He glanced sideways at Cobaltclaw. "There's still some prey left. Maybe it's deaf. Egg, do you think you can catch it?"

Egg's eyes gleamed, "I'll try."

Frecklepaw gave his fur a bad-tempered shake. "She's only just been made an apprentice!" he grumbled.

Egg dropped into a crouch and began to creep forward, using tufts of long grass as cover. But she had forgotten to check the wind direction; the breeze was blowing directly from her to the squirrel. Suddenly the creature sat upright, then raced for the nearest tree, its bushy tail waving in the air.

Letting out a screech of frustration, Egg erupted out of the grass. She hurtled across the clearing, cutting down the squirrel's lead, but she was still several paw steps behind when it reached the tree and began to climb. With a massive Skyclan leap, Egg hurled herself up the tree behind it, and fastened her jaws in its tail before it could reach the safety of the branches. Egg and the squirrel fell to the ground together, the squirrel struggled frantically for a couple of heartbeats, then went limp.

Egg rose to her paws with her prey dangling in front of her. "Was that okay?" she panted through a mouthful of fur.

"Great catch!" Cherrytail declared, padding over to her and giving the squirrel a sniff.

Poppystar noticed that Cobaltclaw was nodding in agreement, and Frecklepaw's eyes were wide with awe, his ill temper forgotten.

"Well done," Poppystar meowed as they padded over to join Egg at the foot of the tree. "But next time, remember to check the wind. If you'd worked your way around so your scent wasn't carried to your prey, you wouldn't have had to chase it like that."

Egg's eyes were still shining with triumph. "I'll remember," she promised, dropping the squirrel at Poppystar's paws.

"When we've caught some prey we bury it," Cherrytail explained, scratching busily at the soft ground beneath the tree with his hind paws. "Then we come back and fetch it later, when we've caught enough to take back to camp."

"I can see a pigeon!" Frecklepaw hissed in an excited whisper as Cherrytail dropped the squirrel into the hole and began scraping earth back over it. "Can I try to catch it?"

Cobaltclaw nodded, and his apprentice slipped away into the undergrowth. Poppystar spotted the pigeon: a fine plump bird pecking among the roots of a nearby oak tree. Frecklepaw was carefully skirting the clearing to approach from the right direction; Poppystar guessed he was extra eager to make a catch of his own to prove he was just as good as Egg.

As Cherrytail finished burying the squirrel and dropped a beech husk on the spot to mark it, Poppystar caught sight of Frecklepaw peering out of a clump of fern next to the oak tree. But something alerted the pigeon; it fluttered upward to land on a branch.

"Bad luck!" Cobaltclaw muttered.

But Frecklepaw hadn't given up. He emerged from the ferns and bunched his muscles to take a leap into the tree, on the side away from the pigeon. Though Poppystar didn't think he could possibly have startled the bird, it flew off into another tree before he could get close enough to pounce. Frecklepaw followed with a neat jump from the end of a branch onto a fork in the next tree.

"Come on." Poppystar waved her tail to beckon her patrol. "Let's see what happens."

Frecklepaw was gradually drawing closer to the pigeon. Poppystar's pelt prickled with excitement as she watched the apprentice's agile progress through the branches. Cobaltclaw had taught him well. Even so, Poppystar wasn't sure that Frecklepaw would be able to manage the kill on his own. The pigeon was large, and becoming more and more flustered as Frecklepaw drew closer. With every heartbeat Poppystar expected it to fly off.

"Spread out," she whispered to the rest of the patrol. "Climb trees so that we're surrounding the pigeon."

Cherrytail, Egg, and Cobaltclaw headed off in different directions. Poppystar chose the tree next to the one where the pigeon had finally settled on a branch. Frecklepaw was edging closer, prowling along another branch a tail-length higher.

Poppystar had just started to climb when a terrified yowl split the

silence of the woods. "Watch out! Get away from there!"

The pigeon flew off, vanishing into a more distant clump of trees. "Mouse dung!" Frecklepaw exclaimed, staring after it indignantly.

Poppystar dropped to the ground again to see Egg hurtling across the forest floor, her voice still raised in a loud wail. She charged into Cobaltclaw as he braced himself to jump onto the trunk of a fallen tree, bundling him away from it. "There's a fox! A fox!" she screeched.

"Get off me!" Cobaltclaw pushed Egg away an scrambled to his paws, spitting in fury.

Poppystar paused for a heartbeat to taste the air. She picked up the Skyclan border markings a few tail-lengths ahead, and sure enough, a strong scent of young fox.

"How did you know about that?" she asked Egg, padding over to where the new apprentice had crouched in the grass and was staring around fearfully.

Egg staggered to her paws, trying to force her bristling fur to lie flat. "My den is on the other side of that tree," she explained. "At least, it was until the fox came."

Poppystar nodded worriedly. "Thanks for warning us," she meowed. "We don't want a fox in our territory. We'll have to organize a patrol to hunt it down, and chase it away if we have to."

"No need," Cherrytail assured her, strolling over to her side. "The fox has gone now."

"You knew about it?" Poppystar asked, baffled. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Cherrytail shrugged. "There was no point. I knew the trail led away from our territory."

"That's not what you told me!" To Poppystar's amazement, Egg pushed herself between her and her deputy, gazing at her mentor with troubled blue eyes. "You said that the fox had come to live

here permanently, and I wouldn't be safe if I stayed here on my own."

A thorn of suspicion stabbed Poppystar. "When did he say this?" she asked Egg.

"A few days ago, when he came to find me to warn me about the fox," Egg replied, looking confused. "He was right, wasn't he? I mean, foxes won't hurt me, now that I live with the Clan."

Poppystar's suspicions hardened into certainty. *Cherrytail lied to me! And he lied to Egg about the danger from the fox, just to get her to join the Clan.*

With an effort, she fought back her shock and anger. She didn't want to let the others know what Cherrytail had done.

"Foxes are very unlikely to attack the gorge," she assured Egg. "And even if they do, we have plans in place to defend ourselves. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"That's great!" Egg puffed with relief.

Poppystar glanced at Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw. The apprentice had clambered down from the branches and was sniffing around the fallen tree. "The fox scent is quite stale," he reported to Cobaltclaw with a bewildered look.

His mentor looked just as puzzled, while Cherrytail was standing by with defiance in his green eyes as if he was challenging Poppystar to say something about his plot.

"Cobaltclaw," Poppystar meowed, "take Frecklepaw and Egg and see if you can find another pigeon. No, Cherrytail," she added, as her deputy was about to move off with the rest of the patrol, "you stay here. I want a word with you."

She kept silent until the other three cats had disappeared among the trees. Cherrytail gave his shoulder fur a couple of nonchalant licks as he waited for her to peak. Once she was sure they couldn't be overheard, Poppystar turned on him angrily. "You can't recruit Clan members with lies!"

Cherrytail met her gaze steadily. "It wasn't a lie. There was a fox here, and Egg will be much safer with the Clan. Look at her," he added, waving his tail in the direction the cream-colored she-cat had taken. "Long legs, powerful haunches. She's obviously one of us."

"True." Poppystar twitched her ears. She wondered what other secrets her deputy was keeping form her, suddenly she remembered what Leafdapple had told her about Cherrytail and Haze running through the Twolegplace at night. *Can that possibly be true?*

With a shock like a plunge into icy water, Poppystar realized that she no longer trusted her deputy.

"Is that all?" Cherrytail interrupted her thoughts. He looked quite cheerful now, as if he was satisfied that he had explained himself successfully. "If so, I'll go catch up with the others."

He bounded off. Poppystar watched him, shaking her head sadly. *He doesn't even see that he's done anything wrong.* She resented his secrecy and the way he had manipulated Egg, yet she had to admit that the new apprentice would be a valuable addition to the Clan. She had natural talent, and seemed like a quick learner. *Maybe it doesn't matter how Egg was persuaded to join us. Skyclan is obviously where she's meant to be.*

The sun was starting to go down, filling the forest with red-gold light as the patrol made its way back to camp. Frecklepaw was delighted that he'd managed to catch another pigeon, and staggered along with it proudly. Cobaltclaw was carrying two mice, while Egg had caught a sparrow and Cherrytail a blackbird.

When they were almost at the gorge, Poppystar set down her own prey, a couple of shrews. "Cherrytail, can you manage to carry these back?" she asked. "I'll go and dig up Egg's squirrel and follow you down."

Cherrytail gave her a brisk nod, and managed to get his jaws around the extra prey. Poppystar padded through the trees until she

reached the spot where Cherrytail had buried the squirrel, spotted the beech husk marker, and began to dig. As she was shaking damp earth off the fresh-kill she heard a rustle in the undergrowth, and Echosong came into view, with a bundle of herbs in his mouth. He looked tired; his pelt was ungroomed and its white patches were grubby.

A pang of sympathy shook Poppystar. "I'll get you some help," she promised when she had greeted Echosong. "Maybe Shrewtooth would like to take a break from her warrior duties."

Echosong dropped his burden and stalked forward, tension in every line of his body. "Shrewtooth has never shown any interest in becoming a medicine cat," he mewed bitterly. "But Frecklepaw obviously wants to change his apprenticeship!"

Poppystar sighed. "We've discussed this. We can't have a daylight warrior as our medicine cat."

"We could find a way to make it work," Echosong argued. "It's not as if my bones are creaking with age. I plan on being around for a long time yet!"

Warmth flooded through Poppystar as she felt her old friendship with the medicine cat beginning to revive. "Good. I'm very glad," she murmured, touching Echosong's ear lightly with her nose.

Carrying the squirrel, she headed for the camp again. Echosong retrieved his bundle of herbs and padded by her side. Near the edge of the wood they came upon a sunlit tree trunk overgrown with grass and fern.

"Let's rest for a bit," Poppystar suggested, letting the squirrel fall.

Echosong put down his herbs next to the fresh-kill and joined Poppystar as she stretched out in the patch of warmth, enjoying the fresh green scent of the undergrowth.

"How's Leafdapple?" the medicine cat asked.

Poppystar felt her pads prickle at the cautious note in her friend's voice. "He's fine. Why do you ask?"

Echosong didn't meet her gaze. "I think you ought to know," he began, patting at a grass stem with outstretched paws. "Cats are beginning to talk."

"What about?" Poppystar meowed.

"You and Leafdapple. You're obviously very... close."

"He's a good warrior!" Poppystar pointed out. She felt a burst of excitement. It felt so good to be able to talk about Leafdapple to a friend. "We... we have a real connection," she confessed. "He seems to think the same way I do, and when he's not here, I feel... empty."

"Yes, he's a great Clanmate," Echosong agreed, still with his gaze fixed on the waving stem. "We're lucky to have him. But... Poppystar, you need to be careful not to show favoritism toward the kitty... daylight warriors."

"This isn't favoritism!" Poppystar protested. "I... I want Leafdapple and me to become mates."

Her heart beat faster as she spoke her most secret hope aloud; but it was the truth.

Echosong turned to her, his eyes wide with shock. "But you can't! Not now, with things so tense between the full warriors and the daylight warriors. At the very least, you and Leafdapple ought to wait until things are easier."

If they ever are, Poppystar thought. *I don't* want *to wait,* she added to herself, aware that she sounded like a mutinous apprentice or an impatient kit.

"I can cope," she replied shortly to the medicine cat. "That shouldn't make any difference to me and Leafdapple."

"Besides," Echosong went on as if Poppystar hadn't spoken, "it could be difficult if you had kits. I know that you have a deputy and a medicine cat to help you look after the Clan, but what if there was a battle?"

"Who said anything about kits?" Poppystar asked. "You're being

mouse-brained. It's far too early to be thinking about that."

"No, it's not." Echosong rose to his paws so that he was standing over Poppystar. "You have to stop thinking about Leafdapple in that way, right now! You have a different destiny, one that involves the future of the whole Clan." His voice softened and his deep green gaze slowed with sympathy. "And it is a path that you must walk alone."

Chapter 26

The sun had dipped below the level of the gorge, casting long shadows over the rocks. Poppystar padded across to the fresh-kill pile and dropped her squirrel on top of the rest of the prey. Her belly was still churning after her conversation with Echosong; she felt as if every hair on her pelt were a pricking claw, reminding her of her duty as Clan leader.

As she turned away, Rainfur looked up from the vole she was gulping down. "Hi, Poppystar. Do you want to come and eat with me?"

"No, thanks," Poppystar meowed. "I'm not hungry."

She noticed a flicker of surprise in Rainfur's eyes. "Is everything okay?" the light gray speckled she-cat asked.

Poppystar was in no mood for her Clanmate's concern. "Everything's fine," she snapped. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Stalking toward the trail that led up to her den, Poppystar was relieved that there was no sign of Leafdapple in camp. *I hope he's gone back to his housefolk with Snookpaw.*

But as she began to climb the trail, she heard the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom's voice. "If you twist like this as you leap, Snookpaw, you'll throw your enemy off balance."

Looking down, Poppystar spotted Leafdapple a few fox-lengths farther up the gorge, demonstrating a battle move to Snookpaw and Sparrowpelt.

"That's a great move," the dark brown tabby she-cat meowed. "Can I give it a try?"

Poppystar didn't stop to watch any more. Instead, she leaped up the

last few paw steps to her den and bounded inside, letting out a breath of relief to be on her own at last. Her mind whirled with unwelcome thoughts. Part of her was angry with Echosong, but mostly she was afraid that the medicine cat was right. *Would it really be wrong of me to become Leafdapple's mate?*

Gazing out at the darkening sky, where the first warriors of Starclan glimmered over the trees, Poppystar remembered Sandstar explaining how her ancestors had marked her out as the leader of the new Clan.

"You told me plenty about Starclan," she growled softly. "But you never told me this." Fury tore through her like a stab of lightning, and she scraped her claws across the floor of her den; if Sandstar had been there, she might have raked them across his sandy-colored pelt. "*Why* didn't you tell me that I'd have to put the Clan first, before having a mate or kits? You have Fireheart. Is it so different for she-cats? Why did you make me a leader?"

But even as she spoke, she knew she was being unfair. It was Starclan who had chosen her to be leader, after they sent the sign of a storm of poppies to Echosong. *They trusted me to be the best leader,* she thought, sighing as her rage ebbed away. *I can't let them down.*

Curling up in her mossy nest, Poppystar fell into an uneasy sleep. Mist surged around her, and she found herself stumbling over rocks, with looming cliffs of black stone on either side. She struggled against panic, knowing that this was a dream, but unable to shake off the feeling that she was trapped in an unfamiliar place.

"Are there any cats there?" she called out.

There was no reply, nothing but the echoing sound of water dripping from the rocks.

"Poppystar! Are you okay?"

The voice cut through Poppystar's dream. She struggled back to wakefulness to see Leafdapple at the entrance to her den, outlined against the twilit sky.

I must have only slept for a few heartbeats, but it felt like seasons.

"I'm fine," Poppystar replied, rising groggily to her paws and padding over to him.

"I wanted to ask you if you'd like to come with me to the Twolegplace tonight," Leafdapple went on. "We could look out for Cherrytail and Haze leading one of their patrols." When Poppystar didn't reply right away, he added, "Besides, it would be nice to spend some time away from the Clan for a while."

Oh, yes, it would... Poppystar yearned to agree, to run beside Leafdapple along the mysterious paths of the Twolegplace. And it would be useful to discover whether Cherrytail really was up to something.

But I can't. I'm Clan ladder. I can't.

"No," Poppystar replied, sounding harsher than she had intended. "I can't go chasing around the Twolegplace. My Clanmates need me here."

Even in the dim light, she could see the hurt in Leafdapple's eyes. "I'm your Clanmate, too," he pointed out.

"But you have housefolk." Every word felt like a thorn in her throat. "I'm sorry, Leafdapple. Go home."

Confusion tightened Leafdapple's expression. "But Poppystar—" he began, then broke off. "What about Cherrytail and Haze?" he asked.

"Why are you so eager to accuse them?" Poppystar challenged. "You're not showing much loyalty to your Clan deputy, are you? No other cats have mentioned Cherrytail and Haze leaving the gorge at night. And I don't believe that Cherrytail would order a patrol without discussing it with me first."

As she finished speaking, Leafdapple backed away, his eyes cold. "I thought I meant something to you, more than just another Clanmate," he meowed. "But you won't let yourself get close to me, because you think I'm just a kittypet, don't you?"

The accusation took Poppystar's breath away, and she had no words to respond.

"You're no better than Cherrytail and Tinycloud," Leafdapple went on, the fur along his spine fluffing up with indignation. "They look down their noses at us because we stay loyal to our housefolk as well as to our Clan. I thought you were different, Poppystar, but I was wrong."

Poppystar stared at him in dismay. That wasn't what she thought at all! *But if Leafdapple is so quick to think badly of me, then maybe I'm better off without him.*

Abruptly she turned away. "You don't know everything, Leafdapple," she mewed.

For a heartbeat there was silence, then she heard Leafdapple padding away, the sound of his paw steps fading as he climbed the trail. Part of her wanted to run after him and call him back; instead, she plodded across her den to her nest and settled herself back among the moss.

She had barely closed her eyes when she found the mist swirling around her once again, scudding across glistening black cliffs that trapped her on either side. But this time she could hear the sound of many cats in the gorge ahead of her. Padding forward, she rounded a spur of rock and found herself on the edge of a crowd.

Her heart beating faster, Poppystar tensed her muscles and slid out her claws in case the strange cats attacked her, but none of them even looked at her or seemed to scent her.

In the middle of the throng, a light brown tabby tom stood on top of a rock. Poppystar's paws tingled as she recognized Birdstar, who had been the leader of Skyclan when they were driven out of the forest and came to live in the gorge. But this was not the warrior of Starclan with starlight in his fur; this was a scrawny, exhausted cat who gazed at his Clanmates with desperation in his eyes.

"We'll never find a home here," a cat called to him. "We should have stayed in the forest and *made* the other Clans give us some of their

territory."

"You know they would never have done that," Birdstar retorted. "They wanted us *gone.* They don't care if we starve out here."

"We have to do something," a gray tom rasped; he was sitting close to Poppystar, who could see that every one of his ribs was visible through his pelt. "My kits will be born any day now. They need a nursery. And I need fresh-kill, or I won't be there to raise them." His voice rose to a wail. "My kits will also die!"

"Don't be afraid." A light brown tabby tom leaped up onto the rock beside Birdstar; it was Fawnstep, the Clan's medicine cat. "Our warrior ancestors are watching over us, even here."

His voice faded as he spoke, and Poppystar opened her eyes, blinking as the pale light of a new day crept into her den. She had glimpsed the cats of that long ago Skyclan as they struggled to find themselves a new home after they had been forced to leave the forest.

"They came here," she whispered. "But in the end, they were driven away."

She remembered the pale brown she-cat she had seen in her dream, and the words she had spoken as she left the gorge forever. "This is the leaf-bare of my Clan. Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive."

I must be one of those roots, Poppystar decided. *I must tether Skyclan to its home for all the moons to come.*

Yawning and stretching, she remembered her other dream, when she had raced through the forest with Spottedleaf and other cats of Starclan. "Seize the moment!" Spottedleaf had told her.

This is one of those moments, Poppystar decided. *I can't be with Leafdapple. I have to stay apart from him, for the good of my Clan.*

For the next few days, Poppystar managed to avoid Leafdapple. She spotted him once heading to the training area with Snookpaw, and later joining a hunting patrol with Cherrytail, Haze, and Egg. When the Clan settled down to eat beside the fresh-kill pile, Poppystar carried her prey back to her den so she didn't have to talk to him.

On the third sunrise after their quarrel, Poppystar padded down from her den to find Cherrytail organizing the morning's patrols. Leafdapple shouldered his way through the cats toward the deputy, who was standing beside Haze at the foot of the Rockpile.

"Can I join your patrol today, Cherrytail?" Poppystar heard him ask. "It might be a good idea to go into the Twolegplace and see if we can persuade any more cats to join the Clan."

Is that really what he wants to do? Poppystar wondered. *Or is he trying to spy on Cherrytail, to find out what he's doing in the Twolegplace?*

But Cherrytail shook his head. "We're hunting today. I doubt we'd find many squirrels in the Twolegplace. Besides, we don't need any more cats. The Clan is full enough."

You didn't say that when you persuaded Egg to join, Poppystar thought. Her suspicions of her deputy were reviving, and she wished she could discuss the problem with Leafdapple. She realized that she had not only a potential mate but also a wise friend whom she could rely on for advice.

"I'm putting you in charge of a training patrol," Cherrytail went on to Leafdapple. "Take Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw, and you can have Clovertail, too. See if you can find any prey near the rat pile; no cat has hunted there for a while."

Leafdapple dipped his head in agreement, though he looked dissatisfied.

Unexpectedly, Cherrytail turned to Poppystar. "Do you want to join Leafdapple's patrol?"

Poppystar couldn't meet Leafdapple's eyes. "Uh... I don't think so,"

she stammered. "Sharpclaw brought back a really fat squirrel from the far border yesterday, so I thought I'd take a patrol up there and see if there are any more."

There was a spark of surprise in Cherrytail's eyes. Poppystar felt uncomfortably hot, wondering if he realized she was making an excuse.

"Fine," he mewed at last. "Which cats do you want to take with you?"

Poppystar remembered with a pang how Leafdapple had accused her of being biased against the daylight warriors. *That wasn't fair, and I'll prove it to you!*

"I'll take Harleymoon and Amber," she replied. "And may I have Egg? I'd like to see how she's getting on."

"Sure," her deputy replied, turning away to call Tinycloud and Bouncefire.

Leafdapple collected his patrol and headed for the trail up the cliff, while Poppystar looked around for Harleymoon and Amber. They seemed surprised and pleased to be chosen for a patrol by their Clan leader.

Maybe if I paid them a bit more attention, they wouldn't be such pains in the tail.

With the daylight warriors hard on her paws and Egg bounding along excitedly in the rear, Poppystar led the way toward the Rockpile, ready to cross to the other side of the gorge. Before she reached it, she saw Echosong urgently waving his tail, and halted for the medicine cat to catch up.

"You're going into the woods on the other side?" Echosong called, setting down some wilted leaves he was carrying. When Poppystar nodded, he mewed, "Can you look for borage while you're there? I need some to help Patchfoot's milk come when she has her kits."

"Of course," Poppystar replied.

Echosong patted the leaves. "This is borage. It's the last I have, and you can see it's past its best."

Poppystar studied the herbs and gave them a good sniff, then ordered her patrol to do the same. "Remember the shape of the leaves and the scent," she instructed them, and added to Echosong, "We'll bring you back a good supply, don't worry."

Echosong slid closer to his Clan leader as the rest of the patrol sniffed the leaves. "You've made the right decision about Leafdapple," he whispered. "I know it wasn't easy, but Starclan will thank you for putting the Clan first."

Poppystar felt her fur start to bristle, and struggled to hide her reaction from the medicine cat. *She has no idea how hard it is to have Leafdapple as an enemy!* "Are you ready?" she asked her patrol, waving her tail to move them on again.

"Thank you for looking out for the borage," Echosong meowed, and added in a lower voice, "and good luck with Harleymoon and Amber. Maybe they'll even catch something this time."

This time Poppystar didn't try it to conceal her indignation. "I'm sure they'll be fine!" she snapped.

Echosong blinked in surprise, and Poppystar felt slightly guilty, though she said nothing more as she led the patrol away.

On the way back to camp, Poppystar had to admit that Echosong had been right about the daylight warriors. Harleymoon and Amber had managed to catch only one small sparrow between them, and let a perfectly good rabbit escape because they were messing around. Egg, however, had hunted brilliantly, catching two squirrels and a young pigeon.

"You've picked up the Skyclan hunting technique really quickly," Poppystar told her, managing to speak around her own prey, a blackbird. "Are you glad you joined the Clan?"

Egg nodded eagerly. "It's great, bringing prey for the fresh-kill pile," she mumbled around the feathers that filled her jaws. "And

Cherrytail's a really good teacher. I've learned so many battle moves! If that fox comes back, it'd better watch out!"

"That's good to hear," Poppystar replied. "But don't even think of tackling a fox on your own."

It was sunhigh when the patrol returned to camp. As she crossed the Rockpile, Poppystar realized that almost all the Clan were out in the open, circling anxiously at the foot of the boulders.

"What's going on?" she asked after she dropped her fresh-kill on the pile.

Waspwhisker pressed up close to her, with her kits around her paws; for once they weren't jumping about and getting in every cat's way. "Mintkit and Sandykit heard a strange noise," she explained, "and we've all heard it now."

"It's really weird!" Sandykit squeaked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Poppystar's pads began to tingle. "Where's Cherrytail?"

"His patrol isn't back yet," Sharpclaw replied.

"What do you think the noise could be?" Patchfoot fretted. "Do you think it's a fox?"

Tangle flicked her ears dismissively. "I've never heard a fox that sounded like that."

"It might be some sort of bird," Fallowfern suggested.

"Or maybe it's the Twoleg's dog?" Shrewtooth's black pelt was fluffed up and her eyes were wide with fear.

"I don't think so." Leafdapple let his tail rest on the young cat's shoulders.

"Then it's rats!" Sparrowpelt's tail lashed. "Why are we standing here? Let's go fight them!"

"Please, everyone be quiet!" Poppystar waved her tail to quiet the

excited suggestions. "Let me hear this noise for myself."

Gradually the chatter died away. As silence fell, Poppystar heard a drawn out, eerie wail coming from farther up the gorge, on the far side of the spur of rock that sheltered the training area.

The whole Clan stood frozen as the sound went on and on. Just as it died away there was a flurry of paw steps, and Cherrytail arrived with Haze and Tinycloud.

"What's that?" he demanded, his gaze raking the Clan.

"That's what we're trying to find out," Poppystar explained. "We don't know what can be making that noise."

Cherrytail tipped his head to one side. "It sounds like a Twoleg to me."

"It's that horrible old Twoleg!" Flamekit squealed.

"Yes, he's come to punish us!" Sandykit bounced up and down in a mixture of fear and excitement.

Shrewtooth gazed in horror at the kits and her fur bristled even more until she looked twice her size.

"That's nonsense," Patchfoot mewed sternly to the kits. "Stop trying to frighten every cat. If that is a Twoleg, it sounds like a young one, and it's in trouble."

"We need to investigate," Poppystar decided. "Patchfoot, Waspwhisker, stay here and look after the kits. Stumpy, Shrewtooth, and Cobaltclaw, guard the camp. The rest of you, follow me, but quietly."

With Poppystar in the lead, the Skyclan cats crept up the gorge, past the training area, and around the next corner. The wailing sound started up again, louder now as they came closer.

Peeking around a boulder, Poppystar saw the source of the noise. A young Twoleg kit—a female—was lying among the rocks. She was small, about half the size of a full grown Twoleg, with brown head

fur and brightly colored pelts covering everything except her smooth, pink front paws and face. As Poppystar padded closer she saw that the kit's face was streaked with mud and moisture, and there was earth smeared on her pelts; up above were raw gashes on the rock face. Even worse, one of her hind legs was splayed at an awkward angle beside her, and from the way the kit's muscles were tensed, it was clear she was in agony.

"She fell over the cliff," Poppystar murmured, raising her tail to halt her Clanmates who were following her. "Poor kit, she's badly hurt."

She had halted a few tail-lengths away, but even at this distance the kit's pain and fear scents were almost overwhelming. "Keep back," Poppystar warned her Clan. "She's so scared, she might lash out at us. Echosong, come with me."

"Hang on a moment." Tinycloud pushed his way to the front of the crowd. "I don't think we should have anything to do with this. It might be a trap."

"That's right," Cory mewed. "There could be bigger Twolegs hiding, ready to trap us."

"They do that sort of thing," Cinder agreed.

Rainfur was nodding, too, and some of the other cats looked uncertain. *And they might be right,* Poppystar thought. She pricked her ears and tasted the air, but the scents of the young Twoleg, and the noise she was making, drowned out everything else.

"That's nonsense." Echosong padded forward with a flick of his tail. "This is an injured kit, for Starclan's sake. Look at her leg! No Twoleg would put one of their own in that much pain just to trap us."

Without waiting for Poppystar's order, he padded past and approached the little Twoleg. Poppystar heard him purring loudly; his tail was straight up in the air and his fur fluffed up in a way that made him look soft and handsome. *He must have been such a popular kittypet!* Poppystar thought suddenly.

The Twoleg kit stopped wailing as Echosong trotted up to her and reached out feebly with one paw to stroke him. Echosong purred even louder, and pushed his head up against the kit. "I don't want to frighten her," he mewed apologetically, with a glance back at Poppystar.

Poppystar gestured with her tail for the rest of the Clan to back off and hide among the rocks. She was conscious of their gleaming eyes peering out as she padded cautiously forward. *Now I have to behave like a kittypet, with all the Clan watching me,* she thought, wincing. *I'll never hear the last of it!*

She wasn't sure exactly how kittypets behaved, but she tried to copy Echosong, who was brushing his pelt against the Twoleg kit and making affectionate trilling sounds. Poppystar flinched as the kit stretched out to touch her, but she felt a purr rising in her throat at the feeling of the Twoleg paw stroking along her back. *It's kind of... nice.*

She let the kit stroke her while Echosong gave the injured leg a good sniff. "It's broken," the medicine cat reported. "But it's too big for me to treat with a splint. And I'm not sure that Clan medicines would be any good for Twolegs."

"If we can't help her, we shouldn't waste any more time with her." Poppystar jumped at the sound of Tinycloud's voice, and glanced over her shoulder to see that the white tom had approached without her noticing. "There are patrols to get on with," he reminded them.

Poppystar was uneasy about leaving the kit, yet she didn't see what else they could do. But as she stepped back out of reach, the little Twoleg started wailing again and her pink paws scrabbled on the stones.

"We have to do something!" Echosong protested.

"Like what?" Cherrytail growled, emerging from behind a rock and padding up to stand beside Tinycloud. His voice was harsh and unsympathetic.

"We have to find her family," Echosong insisted, his neck fur bristling at the deputy's tone. "We can't help her, so we must find Twolegs who can."

Cocking his head to one side, Cherrytail fixed on Poppystar with his brilliant green gaze; he was waiting for her order, but it was clear what he wanted her to say.

Poppystar felt uneasy. She wanted to help the Twoleg kit, but she wasn't sure if that was the sort of thing that Clan cats were supposed to do. *Should we work alongside Twolegs to help them?* She couldn't imagine that Sandstar would get involved in something like this. Not that the Thunderclan leader wouldn't care that a Twoleg was hurt, but his life seemed so completely separate from the affairs of Twolegs.

But I'm not Sandstar, and this isn't his Clan.

Suddenly Poppystar was aware of the presence of Spottedleaf close beside her. She seemed to hear the tortoiseshell tom's voice: *Seize the moment!* Poppystar felt as though Spottedleaf was telling her that this could be very important for the future of Skyclan.

"Echosong is right," she announced. "Skyclan will help the injured Twoleg."

Chapter 27

"Okay, but how are we going to find out where the Twoleg kit comes from?" Cherrytail quires.

Poppystar was relieved that her deputy seemed to be accepting her decision, even if he didn't agree with it. "Snookpaw, Leafdapple, come here," she ordered, beckoning with her tail. "You know the Twolegplace. Have you ever seen this kit before?"

She tensed as Leafdapple approached, but the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom padded past without even looking at her. He and his apprentice stood gazing down at the little Twoleg's face for a couple of heartbeats.

"Sorry," Leafdapple meowed. "I don't recognize her."

I'd better send back to the camp for Cobaltclaw, Poppystar thought. *I'm not sure about asking Harleymoon and Amber. They live quite close to Leafdapple. Maybe this kit comes from a different part of the Twolegplace.*

But before she could give the order, Snookpaw, who had turned away from the kit, suddenly turned back and gave her a deep sniff. "I know that scent!" she chirped. "There's a Twoleg nest with really strong smelling flowers outside, and that same scent is on her pelt." Examining the Twoleg again, she added, "I think I've seen these pelts hanging on the Twolegs' spiky silver tree, too."

"That's great, Snookpaw," Poppystar mewed, while Leafdapple blinked proudly at his apprentice. "Can you take us there?"

"I think so." Snookpaw straightened up, looking very serious. "I'll try."

"Then let's get back to camp and sort out a patrol."

As Poppystar was gathering her cats together, ready to head back down the gorge, Echosong padded over to her. "I'll stay behind," he meowed. "I might be able to do something. And the Twoleg seems calmer when we're here."

Poppystar nodded. "Good idea. I'll send some cat to help you."

Sharpclaw and Tinycloud raced back to camp ahead of the others, so that by the time Poppystar arrived the cats who had stayed behind had been brought up to date with the news.

"We want to come!" Mintkit squealed, hurling himself at Poppystar.

"Yes, we want to see Twolegplace," Sandykit added, bouncing up behind her brother.

"Certainly not." Waspwhisker followed them, gathering all four kits together with her tail. "You're not even apprentices. You can't expect to be chosen for patrols yet."

"It's not fair," Flamekit grumbled, lashing his tiny tail. "We never get to do the fun stuff."

The rest of the Clan was clustering eagerly around Poppystar, for a few heartbeats she felt bewildered about whom she should choose.

"You should take all the kittypets!" Amber suggested. "We know Twolegplace really well."

Cherrytail fixed the black and white she-cat with a hard gaze. "It's *Poppystar's* decision who she takes."

Poppystar flicked her ears at her deputy in acknowledgement. "I want you to come, Cherrytail," she mewed. "Snookpaw, of course, because you know where we're going. And Leafdapple."

It was hard not to let her voice shake as she named the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom. This would be the first time they had patrolled together since their quarrel. *It'll be so hard to have him with us, but I can't leave him out; he's Snookpaw's mentor.*

"Stumpy and Sharpclaw," she finished quickly. "Clovertail, you're in

charge of the camp while we're away. Have a few cats keep watch in case of trouble. Patchfoot, I have a job for you."

The black and white she-cat twitched her ears in surprise and padded over to Poppystar clumsily, because of the weight of the kits in her belly.

"Go up the gorge and join Echosong," Poppystar instructed, waving her tail in the direction of the injured Twoleg. "He might need a bit of help."

"From me?" Patchfoot sounded even more surprised. "I don't know anything about being a medicine cat."

"You won't need to. Echosong wants some cat to help him comfort the little Twoleg. Pretend she's one of your kits. Cuddle up to her. Purr."

"Cuddle? Purr?" Patchfoot gave Poppystar a doubtful look. "Okay, Poppystar, if you say so." She plodded off up the gorge, shaking her head.

Poppystar watched her go, feeling faintly amused in spite of everything. Then she gathered her patrol with a wave of her tail. "Let's go."

Poppystar stared up at the Twoleg nests as she and her patrol halted on the outskirts of Twolegplace. The red stone walls loomed over the cats and blocked out part of the sky. Already her senses were attacked by a chaos of scents and noises: monsters, dogs, strange cats, and the weird aromas of Twoleg food.

How can the kittypets put up with this every day?

"Okay, Snookpaw," she meowed. "You're in charge now. Which way do we go?"

Snookpaw gave her a scared look, as if she was overwhelmed now that she was actually faced with the task of finding the little Twoleg's nest.

"Take your time," Leafdapple murmured. "You'll be fine."

Snookpaw flashed a grateful glance at her mentor. "I think it's this way."

She padded down an alley, pausing every few paw steps to taste the air. Poppystar followed, with the rest of the patrol bunched close behind her. After a few heartbeats, Cherrytail brushed past her and bounded up beside Snookpaw. His paw steps were firm and his tail was erect, as if he was completely confident in these strange surroundings.

Poppystar watched him through narrowed eyes, her pelt quivering with concern. Had Leafdapple been right after all, about the secret night patrols in the Twolegplace? She tried to catch the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom's eye, but Leafdapple was resolutely not looking at her.

Sadness stabbed at Poppystar's heart like a thorn. More than anything she wanted to forget her duty to her Clan, just for once, and ask Leafdapple's forgiveness. *But I can't do that,* she thought with a sigh, trying to push the sadness away. *And right now we have to concentrate on helping the little Twoleg.*

Snookpaw led the patrol around a corner and to the edge of a small Thunderpath. "I think we have to cross here," she mewed.

"Right." Cherrytail took over at once. "Every cat get ready. Run when I say 'Now!'"

Poppystar stood at the edge of the Thunderpath beside her Clanmates, wrinkling her nose at the acrid scent that rose from the hard black surface. Her ears flicked up at the sound of a monster, and she exchanged a warning glance with Cherrytail. The noise grew louder; the cats crouched down as the monster growled past, rushing on round black paws. A gust of wind buffeted their fur as it raced by, a couple of tail-lengths in front of their noses.

"It didn't see us," Sharpclaw whispered as the noise died away.

Poppystar glanced up and down the Thunderpath. The monster had left a foul stink behind it; she passed her tongue over her lips a few times, trying to get rid of its taste.

"Now!" Cherrytail yowled.

All six cats launched themselves forward. Poppystar felt her flying paws beating on the hard surface; then she was safely across, looking around to make sure the rest of the patrol had made it, too.

"Nothing to it, really," Cherrytail mewed nonchalantly.

Oh, yes? Poppystar thought. *And how come you're so experienced with Thunderpaths?*

Snookpaw took the lead again, over a fence and across a garden where a strange kittypet peered out at them from under a bush, but didn't try to approach the patrol.

"I think the next nest is the one we want," she told Poppystar.

Bounding up to the fence, she clawed her way up it and balanced, swaying, at the top, her fur spiked in shock. In the same heartbeat, a dog started yapping loudly on the other side of the fence.

"Now what?" Cherrytail muttered. "She never said there was a dog."

The wooden fence shook as something thumped into it from the other side, and the yapping grew louder still. Snookpaw half jumped, half fell down and staggered across the grass to where the patrol was waiting.

"S-sorry," she stammered. "That's the wrong garden."

"Thank Starclan for that!" Sharpclaw exclaimed, with a glance across to where the dog was still hurling itself at the fence.

"So what do we do now?" Cherrytail asked with an irritable flick of his tail-tip. "Are we lost?"

"I'm really sorry..." Snookpaw repeated.

"Take it easy." Leafdapple rested his tail across his apprentice's shoulders. 'Just think. When was the last time you were really certain of where we were?"

"When we crossed the Thunderpath," Snookpaw replied with a look of relief.

"Then let's go back there," Poppystar meowed.

She took the lead, all her senses alert for more dogs or monsters, until the patrol stood once more by the side of the Thunderpath. "Do we need to cross again?" she asked Snookpaw.

The apprentice shook her head. "I think it's this way," she meowed, pricking her ears as she led the patrol farther along the Thunderpath, slipping along in the shade of bushes that hung over the walls. She whisked around the next corner, picking up the pace as if she felt she was getting close, only to come to a halt when the path ended in a high wall built of the same Twoleg red stone.

"I don't remember that at all," she murmured unhappily.

Poppystar heard Stumpy's claws scraping impatiently on the ground and cast a swift glance at the brown tabby she-cat. Stumpy's eyes were snapping with annoyance, but she didn't say anything.

Cherrytail's tail-tip was twitching back and forth. "Snookpaw—"

"Are you sure we turned the right corner?" Leafdapple interrupted, padding up to his apprentice. "Try to remember what it looked like the last time you were here."

Snookpaw closed her eyes, wrinkling her nose up as if she was thinking hard. "There was a holly tree," she began. "I know that's right..." She hesitated a heartbeat longer, then exclaimed. "But the tree was much bigger! Now I know where we are!"

Confident now, she raced back to the corner with the patrol hurrying after her. She ran along the edge of the Thunderpath they had crossed, until she reached the next corner, where a huge holly tree loomed over the top of a pale wooden fence. Around the corner was a narrow alley with Twoleg nests on either side, separated from the path by low stone walls.

"This is it!" Snookpaw trilled. "I can smell the flowers already."

As she followed her down the alley, Poppystar could hear Twolegs yowling; the sound grew louder until they reached a nest about halfway down the alley. Snookpaw leaped up onto the wall, and Poppystar followed her.

A large square of grass stretched in front of them, with the Twoleg nest at the far side. A male Twoleg was in the garden looking under bushes and inside a small wooden den. He kept on yowling as he searched; a few moments later a female Twoleg appeared from the nest and added her yowls to her mate's. Even though she had no idea what they were saying, Poppystar could pick up their fear scent and realized how distressed they were. There was something familiar about their actions, too. It reminded her of the time Birdkit had gone missing among the boulders near the training area, and Patchfoot had hunted for him as if he was the most precious piece of prey.

"I think they're looking for the kit," she meowed. "Well done, Snookpaw. You brought us to the right place."

"Yes, you did well," Leafdapple agreed, leaping up onto the wall on the opposite side of Snookpaw from Poppystar.

Snookpaw blinked at her mentor and let out a purr. "I never thought I'd do it," she confessed.

"So now what do we do?" Cherrytail demanded, jumping up and gazing out into the garden. "How do we tell the Twolegs where their kit is?"

"I'll get them to follow me," Snookpaw mewed, leaping down onto the grass before Poppystar could stop her.

Cherrytail shrugged. "She's a kittypet. Maybe she knows how to talk to Twolegs."

Snookpaw raced across the garden and up to the female Twoleg, who let out a sharp exclamation as she wound herself around her ankles. The Twoleg male spun around and let out a growl as his gaze fell on Snookpaw. He lumbered toward the apprentice, waving his arms and making hissing noises.

Snookpaw stepped back, bewildered. "I know where your kit is!" she meowed loudly. "You have to come with me!"

The Twolegs obviously didn't understand. The female flapped her hands and screeched at Snookpaw, who backed farther away.

"Come back here, mouse-brain!" Cherrytail yowled.

At the sound, the male Twoleg turned toward the wall and spotted the cats perched on top of it. He let out a sharp exclamation, and dived to pick up a rounded Twoleg thing that looked as if it was made out of the same reddish stone as the nest.

"Uh-oh..." Cherrytail muttered. He whipped around and leaped down into the alley.

At the same moment the Twoleg flung the red thing. Snookpaw fled across the grass and launched herself at the top of the wall; Leafdapple bundled her down into the alley and Poppystar jumped down after them. The red thing hit the wall just below the spot where they had been standing and shattered into pieces.

"That was close," Cherrytail muttered.

Stumpy and Sharpclaw, who had been keeping watch in the alley, were kneading the stony ground with claws extended.

"We've got to go," Stumpy hissed. "The Twolegs don't want us here."

"I don't understand!" Snookpaw's fur was ruffled and her eyes wide with disbelief. "Why did they do that? We're only trying to help."

"Twolegs are stupid," Cherrytail stated, shrugging. "We've done all we can here," he added with a glance at Poppystar. "We'd better get back to camp before there's any more trouble."

With every paw step back to the gorge, Poppystar's uneasiness increased. She couldn't accept their failure as easily as Stumpy and Cherrytail. *There must be something we can do!* She wished she could ask Leafdapple's advice, but every word she might have spoken stuck in her throat.

When she led her patrol down the trail into the gorge, the rest of the Clan was waiting to hear what had happened.

"Did you manage to find her kin?" Lichenfur rasped, raising one hind leg to scratch behind his ear. "It gives me the creeps, having a Twoleg in the gorge."

"At least the wailing has stopped," Tangle muttered.

"We found them," Cherrytail reported before Poppystar could reply. "They were searching in their garden for the kit. But they wouldn't listen when Snookpaw tried to tell them where she was."

"They threw a flowerpot at us!" Snookpaw exclaimed, her eyes stretched wide with distress and indignation. "I never thought Twolegs would behave like that."

"Then you've learned something, *kittypet*," Tinycloud murmured under his breath.

"Snookpaw, I don't think you should let it worry you," Leafdapple told his apprentice, giving her a friendly flick over the ear with his tail. "You know that some Twolegs don't like strange cats in their gardens."

"That's true," Cobaltclaw agreed. "And if they were searching, they might have thought you were getting in the way."

Snookpaw's tail drooped unhappily. "They didn't have to get so angry."

"I'm sure this means we shouldn't get involved," Rainfur meowed, dipping her head to give her neck fur a few brisk licks. "The Twolegs don't deserve our help if they're going to throw things at us."

Fallowfern nodded. "There's nothing more we can do, anyway."

Poppystar didn't agree; her paws tingled with the conviction that the Clan was meant to help. And she felt more worried still at the news that the wailing had stopped. The ordinary sounds of the gorge—the rushing water that poured out of the rocks, the rustle of

trees, the pad of paws on stone—seemed muted and ominous.

"I'm going to go and see how Echosong is getting along," she announced.

Several of her Clanmates padded after her as she headed up the gorge. As she rounded the spur of rock to reach the place where the little Twoleg was lying, Echosong came to meet her. Poppystar's nose twitched at the strong scent of comfrey that wreathed around the medicine cat.

"Did you find her parents?" Echosong asked, his deep green eyes wide with anxiety. "Are they coming?"

"We found them, but they're not coming." Quickly Poppystar told Echosong what had happened in the Twolegplace. "How is the Twoleg kit?"

"Not good." Echosong shook his head, and led the way back to the kit's side. "She closed her eyes and stopped moving soon after you left. Unless we can get help for her, I don't think she's going to wake up."

The Twoleg lay motionless, her leg still bent at the awkward angle. Her face looked paler than before and her eyes were closed; Poppystar might have thought she was dead, except for the faint rise and fall of her chest. Patchfoot was curled up asleep in the crook of her arm, with one of the Twoleg's forepaws lying lightly across her back.

"I tried putting a poultice of comfrey on her broken leg," Echosong explained, pointing to the patches of chewed-up herb plastered to the kit's skin. "But it's hard to get a poulitice to stick where there isn't any fur for it to stick to."

Poppystar looked down at the little Twoleg for a few heartbeats without speaking. *What if I had kits and one of them was lost, or hurt?* she asked herself, pushing away the bleak knowledge that her duties wouldn't allow her to have kits of her own. *I'd be frantic!*

"We're not going to give up," she announced. "We have to try again."

"But what else can we do?" Cherrytail asked, with a frustrated lash of his tail. "We didn't manage to get through to the Twolegs, and I don't see how we'll ever be able to."

"That's right," Tinycloud agreed. "It's impossible to know the way that Twolegs think. They don't seem to have any reason."

Poppystar's pelt tingled as the beginnings of a plan slid into her mind. "If we don't know the way Twolegs think," she began thoughtfully, "we'll have to use the way cats think instead. The Twolegs were hunting for their kit; we'll just have to help them."

Chapter 28

Author's Note: No uploads the last two days because I was out of town for Independence Day but I am back now!

"When we're tracking prey, we follow a scent trail," Poppystar mused, tasting the kit's strong Twoleg scent. "Is there any way to lay one for the Twolegs?"

"There's no point," Harleymoon pointed out. "Twolegs have enormous noses, but their sense of smell isn't worth a mouse-tail. Otherwise they'd know we were here!"

Poppystar admitted that the daylight warrior had a point. 'Then how can we let them know where their lost kit is?"

She wasn't expecting an answer, but just then an excited cry came from Frecklepaw, who had been scrambling among the rocks at the foot of the cliff. "Look what I've found!"

His voice woke Patchfoot, who blinked and stretched her jaws in an enormous yawn. "That was the best sleep I've had in moons," she meowed. "Poppystar, what's going on? Are the kit's parents coming?"

Poppystar explained what had happened in the Twolegplace while she padded over to Frecklepaw to see what the apprentice had discovered.

Patchfoot stepped carefully out of the Twoleg's grasp and followed, her whiskers twitching in disappointment. "Poor little kit," she murmured. "We have to do something."

"Look," Frecklepaw repeated as the two she-cats approached. He pointed with his tail at a bright blue object lying between two rocks.

"What is it?" Poppystar asked, stretching out a paw to give the object a tentative prod. "It looks as if it's made of Twoleg pelt stuff."

"It's the kit's backpack," Frecklepaw told her. His eyes shone with pride at being able to help. "Twolegs use them to carry stuff."

Poppystar nodded. "I see. Like a very big leaf wrap."

She gripped the edge of the backpack between her teeth and tugged it up onto the surface of the nearest rock. Several smaller objects fell out of it, scattering across the cats' paws.

More of the Clan cats were starting to gather around, murmuring among themselves as they saw what Frecklepaw had found. The apprentices wriggled to the front, their faces alive with curiosity.

"Twolegs are weird," Nettlepaw mewed, dipping her head to sniff at a scrap of white pelt. "Why do they want to drag all this stuff around with them? What's it all for, anyway?"

"That's a hanky," Frecklepaw told her importantly. "Twolegs wipe their noses with them."

"Wipe their...?" Nettlepaw's eyes widened and she took a pace back. "You mean they don't just lick it off? Yuck!"

"And what's this?" Birdpaw asked, nosing at a round green thing that looked a bit like the backpack, but much smaller. Something inside it jingled when he moved it.

"Sorry, I don't know," Frecklepaw replied, his sense of importance suddenly deflating. "But this is a hair ban," he added, snagging his claws into a long pink thing and holding it up. "Twoleg females tie up their head fur with them."

Egg gave the hair band a nervous sniff, while Nettlepaw exchanged a glance with her brother.

"Hey, you should try that," Birdpaw suggested, giving her a friendly shove. "Tie some bindweed around your head fur."

"My head fur is fine as it is, thanks," Nettlepaw snapped.

Meanwhile Snookpaw had approached, carrying something long and glittery in her jaws. "Here's her necklace," she mumbled around it. "I guess it came off when she fell."

"And what's *that* for?" Nettlepaw squeaked.

Snookpaw shrugged. "Dunno. My Twoleg female puts them around her neck. I thought maybe it was to stop her head from falling off."

"That can't be right," Birdpaw murmured, puzzled. "This one's head hasn't fallen off—"

"That's all very well," Patchfoot interrupted, rolling her eyes at Poppystar, who suppressed a *mrrow* of amusement. *The apprentices could go on like this all day!* "But what are we going to do with all of this? Does it help us at all?"

"I think it does, actually," Poppystar replied slowly. "The Twolegs can't follow a scent trail, but they can see all right, can't they? We can use this stuff to lead them from Twolegplace to here, so that they find their kit."

"Let's hope they have some tracking skills," Cherrytail commented.

"Well, I can't believe you're going to so much trouble," Rainfur meowed, gazing disdainfully at the scattering of Twoleg objects.

"Nor can I," Tinycloud agreed. "It's nothing to do with us. Why should we care whether the Twolegs find their kit or not?"

Patchfoot's eyes stretched wide. "I can't believe you said that!"

Tinycloud shrugged. "I just think it's too much trouble. We're putting ourselves in danger, and for what?"

"Well, I think it's a great idea!" Sharpclaw glared at her brother. "Are we going now?"

Poppystar gazed up at the sky; the sun was starting to go down, and not much time was left if they were to lead the Twolegs to the gorge before dark. "Yes, right now," she decided. "I'll take the same patrols as before. We all know the way now. Each of you pick up

something and follow me."

"I'll stay here, if that's okay," Cherrytail meowed. "I've got a few ideas that might help when the Twolegs come to the gorge."

Poppystar wondered for a moment what her deputy was planning, then told herself firmly that she couldn't keep suspecting his motives, or nothing would get done. "Fine," she mewed briskly. "We'll see you later."

Wincing at the strong Twoleg scent, Poppystar gripped the green jingle thing in her jaws, while the rest of the patrol gathered up the other objects. Leafdapple picked up the backpack, dangling it between his forelegs like some weird piece of fresh-kill.

Poppystar led the way up the cliff face, scrambling over the rocks for there was no clearly defined trail just here. Halfway up she came upon a round object made of Twoleg pelt stuff, with a hard crescent shape sticking out at one side. It was about the size of a Twoleg's head.

That must be to cover their head fur, she thought, pleased with herself for guessing as she grabbed it up and carried it with her.

Near the spot where they reached the top of the cliff, a straggling thornbush grew, thrusting its roots between the rocks. "Hang the backpack there," Poppystar instructed Leafdapple, gesturing with her tail at a jutting branch. "It's big and bright. The Twolegs will be able to see it from a long way off."

Leafdapple nodded and did as she told him, thought he didn't speak to her. Poppystar's heart ached all over again. *This mission would feel much more exciting if we were still friends!*

Working their way across the open ground between the gorge and Twolegplace, Poppystar and her patrol positioned the objects where they thought the Twolegs would easily spot them: on a tree stump, a flat rock, the top of a steep bank. Poppystar checked carefully that each object could be clearly seen behind them before she placed the next one.

Finally, Sharpclaw scrambled up and left the hair band on an overhanging branch of a chestnut tree beside the Thunderpath, on the edge of the open ground. "Now what?" she panted when she jumped down again.

The only thing left was the head fur cover that Poppystar was carrying. By now she was sick of it; it was heavy and awkward and kept tripping her up. She set it down for a moment to take a breather from the all-pervading scent.

"I'll take this to the Twoleg nest," she meow. "With any luck, someone there should recognize it."

"Be careful," Stumpy warned her. "They might throw things again."

Poppystar nodded. *That's a risk I'll just have to take.*

She picked up the cover again and headed for the nest with her patrol padding cautiously behind her. The sun was sliding below the roofs of the Twoleg nests, and the shadows in the alley seemed to reach out for her. She suppressed a shiver as she jumped up onto the wall and looked out across the bright green grass.

At first she thought the space was empty, though the door to the nest was still open. Then she noticed the male Twoleg pacing up and down in the shadow of the bushes on the opposite side. A moment later the female came out and called something to him. Worried that they would both go back inside, Poppystar sprang down and carried the head fur cover across the grass toward the female, letting out a hiss of annoyance as her paws got tangled up again in the pelt-stuff.

As soon as the female Twoleg spotted her, she let out a screech and started flapping her arms again, trying to chase her off.

Yes, we've done all this, Poppystar thought irritably. *Just look at what I'm carrying, will you?*

She dodged to one side as the female swiped at her, fighting the urge to flee back into the alley. Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted Stumpy and Sharpclaw side by side on the top of the wall,

looking on with horrified expressions.

Then the male Twoleg let out a yowl. He ran across the garden and grabbed the female's foreleg, stopping her from swiping again at Poppystar. He was pointing urgently at the head fur cover.

At last!

The male Twoleg crouched down, talking in quiet tones with one pink paw stretched out to Poppystar. The female had stopped screeching, and was staring at her with her eyes wide. Poppystar wanted to drop the cover and run, but she knew that wouldn't do any good. She backed away slowly, trying to keep her fur flat in case the Twolegs thought she was trying to threaten them. The head fur cover dragged on the grass in front of her, luring the Twolegs forward as if it were a tasty piece of fresh-kill. When she reached the wall Poppystar spun around and leaped onto it, noticing with relief that the rest of the patrol had vanished. They didn't want to scare the Twolegs with a horde of unfamiliar cats.

Jumping down into the alley, she looked back at the male Twoleg, who stared over the wall at her for a couple of heartbeats, then opened a gate and followed her out.

That's right. Just keep following...

Reaching the Thunderpath, Poppystar dropped the head fur cover and ran toward the chestnut tree where Sharpclaw had left the hair band. When she stopped and looked back, she saw that the male Twoleg had picked up the cover and was turning it over in his paws; then he raised his head and gazed after Poppystar. It was hard for her to read Twoleg expressions, but she thought he looked puzzled.

A moment later the female Twoleg joined her mate. He gave her the cover and she examined it in her turn. Poppystar twitched her tail impatiently. *Come on! How hard can it be?*

Then her jaws dropped open in dismay as the male turned away and headed back into the mouth of the alley.

"No!" Poppystar let out a desperate wail. "This way!"

The female paused, then headed alongside the Thunderpath, toward Poppystar. Her mate followed her, yowling something, but the female didn't reply. Poppystar's instincts were telling her to race across the Thunderpath and back toward the gorge, but made herself retreat slowly so that she didn't lost the Twolegs.

She was close to the chestnut tree when the female suddenly let out a screech. She started to run, passing Poppystar, who sprang out of the way, and grabbed the hair band from the low branch where Sharpclaw had left it.

"Thank Starclan!" Poppystar purred. "They've found the trail."

The male Twoleg caught up with his mate and pointed across the open ground, to where Snookpaw had spread the hanky over a rock just beyond the line of Twoleg nests. Sure now that the Twolegs could find their own way to the gorge, Poppystar waved her tail to summon her patrol. They emerged from hiding places in the shadows and underneath bushes and crowded around her.

"We did it!" Sharpclaw exclaimed, with an excited bounce.

"Then let's head back to camp," Poppystar meowed. "I want to get there before the Twolegs."

They raced back to the cliffs, staying well clear of the trail of Twoleg objects. Through the dusk, Poppystar could hear the Twolegs shouting as they found each new thing. Her heart soared as she realized that the plan had worked. When the patrol scrambled down the trail that led to the camp, Poppystar skidded to a halt and stared around in surprise. The gorge had never looked so busy. Rainfur, Fallowfern, and Shrewtooth were dragging branches and frons of fern across the den entrances. Cobaltclaw was supervising the three remaining apprentices in moving the fresh-kill pile across the Rockpile and into a hollow among the rocks on the other side of the river. Tangle and Lichenfur were down by the river, using their tails to wipe out paw prints.

They're hiding the camp!

"Are they coming?" Cherrytail demanded, bounding up to Poppystar.

"They're on their way," Poppystar told him. "You're doing a good job," she continued, grateful for her deputy's quick thinking. "It's hard to tell there have ever been cats here."

Cherrytail replied with a tense nod. "I'd rather the Twolegs didn't come anywhere near the gorge," he meowed. "But you're right that the injured kit can't stay here. It's better to control the invasion than have the Twolegs swarming all over us when we're not ready for them."

Leaving her patrol to help with the concealment of the camp, Poppystar headed up the gorge to find Echosong. The medicine cat and Patchfoot were sitting beside the injured kit, who still wasn't moving. Her tiny pink paws lay on the stones beside her, all scratched and smeared with dried blood. Poppystar blinked. *Oh, you poor little kit.*

"Did it work?" Echosong sprang to his paws and rushed over to Poppystar as soon as the Clan leader rounded the spur of rock.

Before Poppystar could reply, they heard the sound of huge paws trampling around on the cliff above their heads, and Twoleg voices yowling.

"Thank Starclan!" Patchfoot whispered. "They're calling for their kit."

"But the kit can't answer," Echosong mewed anxiously.

"Then we'll have to answer for her." Poppystar jumped onto a nearby rock and let out an earsplitting screech.

At first she thought that the Twolegs were ignoring her. She took a deep breath and yowled on a long, throbbing note that echoed off the rocks. A couple of heartbeats later she spotted first the male Twoleg, then his mate, peering over the top of the cliff. Suddenly they let out answering cries and pointed at the motionless kit.

Echosong leaped up beside Poppystar and waved his tail

triumphantly. "They've seen her!"

"And now they'll come to get her," Poppystar mewed, letting her yowl die away. "By then I want no sign of Skyclan anywhere in this gorge. Let's get back to camp right away."

Cherrytail was waiting at the foot of the Rockpile when Poppystar and the other cats returned to the camp. The rest of the Clan were already in their dens; Poppystar spotted them peering out between the ferns and branches that had been piled against the entrances.

"Well?" Cherrytail asked tensely.

"The Twolegs are here," Poppystar reported. "They—"

She broke off as yowls of triumph erupted from the cliff.

"I knew we could do it!" Harleymoon exclaimed, pushing her shoulders through the barrier across the warriors' den.

"Quiet!" Cherrytail snarled. "And get back in there. Do you want the Twolegs to come looking for us?"

Harleymoon vanished abruptly, though Poppystar could still hear squeals and meows of excitement coming from the dens. Waspwhisker's kits were scrambling among the branches outside the nursery; Patchfoot hauled herself up the trail and helped Waspwhisker to round them up and take them back inside.

"I want to know what the Twolegs are doing," Cherrytail commented to Poppystar. "But I don't think we can leave the camp. The whole Clan sounds as if it has bees in its brain."

Poppystar could understand her cats' need to celebrate their success, but she was relieved when the noise died down after a few moments. Choosing a small patrol—Cherrytail, Sharpclaw, Echosong, Leafdapple, and Snookpaw—she crept back up the gorge and peered out from behind the rocks to watch the rescue of the Twoleg kit.

By the time they returned to the spot, the adult Twolegs had been joined by many, many more. They wore bright yellow pelts, and

lowered themselves down into the gorge on long tendrils suspended from the top of the cliff.

"See, Twolegs aren't bad all the time!" Snookpaw whispered, bouncing lightly on her paws. "They've all come to help the kit."

"Maybe." Cherrytail's green eyes were wary. "But I'm not happy about all these Twolegs in our territory. What if they decide to come back?"

Poppystar watched the Twolegs lower a flat, bulky object down the cliff face and lift the little Twoleg gently onto it. "I can't see why they would do that," she murmured.

"But they must know we're here," Sharpclaw murmured, sounding uncharacteristically troubled. "We brought them here, after all."

"And they've got what they came for," Poppystar reassured her.

All the same, as the Twolegs fastened the kit onto the bulky object and started to haul her up the cliff on the tendrils, Poppystar admitted to herself that she shared her Clanmates' concern. *Clan cats and Twolegs lead separate lives,* she thought. *Have I brought them too close together by what I did today?*

Echosong brushed against her shoulder. "You did the right thing," he insisted, as if he had read his Clan leader's thoughts.

But Poppystar could see a shadow behind the medicine cat's gaze, telling her that Echosong was worried, too.

What have I done? she wondered. *And what's going to happen now?*

Chapter 29

First thing next morning, Poppystar padded up the gorge to check out the spot where the Twoleg kit had been lying. Rain had fallen during the night; her paws splashed through puddles and she narrowed her eyes as the rising sun glittered on water dripping from the rocks. A stiff breeze sent small white clouds scudding across the sky.

Poppystar peered cautiously from behind the spur of rock, then padded forward, her jaws parted to taste the air. She could still pick up the mingled scents of many Twolegs, but they were faint and fading; the night's rain had helped to wash them away. There were still many marks of the Twolegs' heavy paws, but Poppystar guessed that they too would fade with time.

Maybe it's all over, and we are safe.

When Poppystar returned to the camp, she found Cherrytail arranging the morning's patrols. At once she picked up the feelings of restlessness among her warriors; they roamed distractedly around the Rockpile, not really listening to Cherrytail as he called their names.

"What are we going to do if the Twolegs come back?" Rainfur fretted. "Maybe we should leave and find ourselves somewhere else to live."

"I'm not moving anywhere," Patchfoot retorted. "Not until my kits are born and fit to travel."

"I'm sure we won't have to." Clovertail brushed his pelt reassuringly against Patchfoot's side. "What can the Twolegs do, after all?"

Shrewtooth shuddered, but didn't try to reply.

Looking around, Poppystar spotted Haze and the other cats from the

Twolegplace huddled together, and she wondered what they were talking about. *What if they decide to leave?* Maybe they didn't feel comfortable in a Clan that had too much to do with Twolegs.

A high-pitched squealing drew Poppystar's attention to the edge of the river. Sandykit was lying on her back with her paws in the air.

"I'm an injured Twoleg!" she wailed. "Help meeeeeee!"

Her siblings frisked around her, darting forward now and then to give her a prod.

"We have to find her Twolegs!" Flamekit announced.

Poppystar suppressed a *mrrow* of laughter. At least Waspwhisker's kits weren't worried about the possible threat from Twolegs. She wished she could say the same about the rest of the Clan. Even the apprentices were looking subdued, and she spotted Sparrowpelt and Bouncefire facing each other with bristling fur, as if the tensions had to break out somehow.

"This is no good," Poppystar muttered. "I have to do something."

A yowl of greeting rang out from the top of the cliff. Poppystar looked up to see all the daylight warriors arriving together. Harleymoon and Amber in the lead, followed by Leafdapple and Cobaltclaw with their apprentices.

That's it! Poppystar thought. *I know what will pull the Clan together and make them feel better.*

Leaping up to the top of the Rockpile, she yowled, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Rockpile for a Clan meeting."

The gaze of every cat was turned on her. Poppystar waited for the daylight warriors to reach the bottom of the gorge, and for Echosong to emerge from his den. Tangle and Lichenfur appeared too, stretching out in a sunny spot near the edge of the river.

"Cats of Skyclan, one of the most important ceremonies for any Clan is the making of a new warrior," Poppystar began when every cat

was listening. "And that is why I have called you together today."

The apprentices brightened up, gazing at one another with excitement sparkling in their eyes, as they wondered which of them their Clan leader meant.

"Yesterday Snookpaw helped her Clan by finding the injured Twoleg's nest," Poppystar went on. "Without her, the little Twoleg would still be lying in the gorge. She might even have died. Snookpaw, you acted as a warrior and you deserve your warrior name."

The apprentice's jaws gape open. "But... but Poppystar," she protested, "I didn't do anything!"

"You did what no other Clan cat could have done," Poppystar assured her. "Leafdapple, has your apprentice, Snookpaw, learned the skills of a warrior?"

Leafdapple's amber eyes were glowing with pride. "She has."

Poppystar's heart wrenched at the thought that his warm look wasn't for her. "And does she understand the meaning of the warrior code?"

"She does."

Poppystar leaped down from the Rockpile and stood in front of Snookpaw, who still looked as if some cat had hit her over the head with a dead pigeon.

"I, Poppystar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice," she declared. "She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn. Snookpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Snookpaw was shivering as she replied. "I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior name. Snookpaw, from this moment you will be known as Snookthorn. Starclan honors your courage and your intelligence, and we

welcome you as a full member of Skyclan."

She rested her muzzle on the top of Snookthorn's head; the young she-cat licked her shoulder and took a pace back to stand beside Leafdapple.

"Snookthorn! Snookthorn!"

The Skyclan cats clustered around to welcome the newest warrior. Poppystar watched them with a deep sense of relief, thankful for their shining eyes and enthusiastic voices. *It worked! Now they're not to worried about the Twolegs. And Snookthorn will be a valuable member of the Clan.*

But as the yowls died away and her Clanmates moved back from Snookthorn, the young cat turned to her with trouble in her eyes.

"I'm really sorry, Poppystar," she mewed, "but I can't stay here."

Shocked murmuring broke out among her Clanmates. Sparrowpelt let out a yowl of protest, echoed by Tinycloud and Rockshade.

"What?" Poppystar stared at the new warrior, baffled, as she raised her tail for silence. "Why not?"

Snookthorn shook her head in confusion. "I—I hated it yesterday, when the Twolegs yowled at us and chased us away. We were trying to help them, but they treated us like enemies."

"They didn't understand—" Poppystar began.

"I know. But that doesn't make it any better," Snookthorn went on miserably. "I've enjoyed being a Clan cat, but I don't want to be an enemy of Twolegs. I can't stay."

"Now hang on a moment." Cherrytail shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. "You just made a promise to protect and defend your Clan. Were you lying when you said that?"

"No..." Snookthorn protested. "I didn't mean..." Her voice trailed into silence and her tail drooped to the ground.

"I think you'd better decide what you did mean," Cherrytail snapped, his eyes glittering with anger.

Snookthorn hung her head without speaking. Poppystar listened with mountain anger to the whispering among her Clan; she heard Bouncefire hiss, "Traitor!" and glared at her until she looked away.

Before Poppystar could speak, Leafdapple stepped forward, touching Snookthorn's ear with his nose. "I know it's hard, to have a paw in two lives."

Snookthron lifted her head and nodded. Her eyes were bleak with pain. "I thought I could do it, but I can't," she confessed. "Living as a Clan cat is making me something I don't want to be—fierce and wild and unwelcome among Twolegs. I'm honored that you think I'm good enough to be a warrior, but it's not something I want. Not anymore."

Leafdapple tipped his head to one side. "It was just one misunderstanding with Twolegs," he meowed. "Your housefolk would never treat you like that."

"Really?" Snookthorn retorted, and now she looked taller and stronger, more like the warrior Poppystar knew she could be. "How do you know that? They were so worried when I got sick after falling in the river. Will they have to keep mending me, after battles and hunting accidents and scraping my paws on these rocks all day? It's not fair to them, to keep putting myself in danger."

Tinycloud let out a snort. "Well, if you're not *brave* enough..." he hissed.

Snookthorn spun around and faced him. "I have the courage to know what I truly am," she replied quietly. "I am a *kittypet.* Twolegs are not my enemies, and I never want to see that look in their eyes again." She turned back to her former mentor. "Leafdapple, you have taught me so much, and I'll always be grateful for that. But I cannot walk with my paws in two worlds. Not anymore."

Poppystar let out a long sigh. She admired the warrior's conviction; it was a shame her loyalty wasn't to Skyclan, because she would

have been a Clanmate she'd be proud of. "We can't keep you here, Snookthorn. But I'm sorry you've made this decision. We'll miss you."

She glared at Cherrytail as her deputy opened his jaws to speak again. *If he tells Snookthorn we're better off without her, I'll claw his ears off!* Cherrytail obviously got the message, because he closed his mouth without speaking.

"I'll miss you, too," Snookthorn replied, letting her gaze travel over her former Clanmates. "I'll never forget the friends I've made in Skyclan." Dipping her head, she added, "Thank you for everything, Poppystar."

She turned away and walked toward the bottom of the trail with her head high. Poppystar felt her heart wrench with sorrow as she watched her. *We've lost a fine warrior.*

"Goodbye, Snookthorn," she called after her; some of her Clanmates called their goodbyes too, but the chorus was thin and ragged, and others just turned away. Snookthorn never looked back.

Twilight was filling the gorge as Poppystar returned from a patrol with a fat squirrel in her jaws. Sharpclaw, Sparrowpelt, and Rockshade followed her, carrying their own prey. The hunting had been good.

As she crossed the Rockpile, Poppystar spotted Cherrytail sitting on the edge of the pool. The dark blue water swirled close to his paws just before veering away downstream. He glanced up at her. Poppystar's paws pricked when she thought she could make out a spark of triumph in his eyes.

As soon as she had dropped her squirrel on the fresh-kill pile, Poppystar padded over to talk to her deputy. "I'm sorry we won't be seeing Snookthorn again," she remarked, trying to stand casual.

Cherrytail rose to his paws and dipped his head politely at her approach. "I'm sorry, too," he agreed.

At least he hasn't said, "I told you so."

"It makes me think that we need to be absolutely certain about the daylight warriors' loyalty," Cherrytail continued. "Including Leafdapple," he added with a meaningful look.

Anger surged through Poppystar, fierce as a flood in leaf-fall. It took every scrap of self-control she possessed not to fall on her deputy and rake her claws across his pelt. "Do you doubt Leafdapple's loyalty?" she demanded, hardly able to believe the strength of her own feelings as she strove to keep her voice steady.

Cherrytail took a step back, surprise flickering in his eyes. "No." His voice was mild as he replied. "No more than I doubt the loyalty of any of the kittypets. It must be very hard for them, split between two lives." He licked one paw and drew it thoughtfully over his ear. "Maybe when the seasons turn colder, more of them will want to stay with their housefolk."

Poppystar had listened to him belittle the daylight warriors for long enough. "It sounds as though you doubt the warrior code," she meowed icily, "if you think it would be so east for our Clanmates to reject it."

Not waiting for a response, she spun around and stalked away. She was furious with Cherrytail for his constant questioning of cats she had come to value, and even more furious with herself for letting the discussion end in a quarrel.

Why did Snookthorn have to leave us? Have we really so little to offer compared with housefolk?

She was heading for her den when she spotted Leafdapple beginning to climb the trail that led to the cliff top. *He's on his way back to the Twolegplace.* Sudden fear clawed at her heart and she ran after him, scrambling up the trail until she caught up to him.

"Are you leaving?" she blurted out.

Leafdapple turned to look at her, his eyes wide with surprise. "Only until tomorrow," he meowed. As Poppystar struggled to hide her relief, he added, "I'll go and visit Snookthorn, but I don't think I'll be able to change his mind."

That wasn't what I wanted to talk about at all, Poppystar thought, confused. *I wanted to tell you how much I want you to stay in Skyclan.*

"That's fine," she mewed evenly. "I just wanted to make sure that Snookthorn is okay. She can come back any time, you know."

Leafdapple's ears twitched skeptically. "Really? And will all her Clanmates welcome her back?"

Poppystar remembered the protests when Snookthorn announced her intention to leave. She couldn't deny that some of the Clan would be hostile to the young cat who had made a promise and then broken it. "*I* will welcome her back, and that's what counts."

Leafdapple dipped his head and turned to go, glancing back after he had taken a couple of paw steps. "Be careful, Poppystar," he murmured. "You cannot force cats to be loyal—not to you and not to the warrior code."

Poppystar stood on the trail, watching the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom climb to the top of the cliff and vanished into the gathering darkness. Her fur prickled with loneliness. Then she reminded herself that all Clan leaders were alone in making decisions on behalf of their Clan. *We have to trust our own instincts, more than any other cat's.*

As she headed for her den again, she spotted tiny figures jumping around on top of the Rockpile, and she recognized Waspwhisker's kits. *What are they doing at this time? They should be tucked up in the nursery.* Between curiosity and concern, she headed down into the gorge again.

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior name," she heard in Sandykit's squeaky voice. "Mintpaw, from this moment you will be known as Mintwhiskers. Starclan honors your... your battle skills and your courage, and we welcome you as a full member of Skyclan."

A warrior ceremony! Poppystar thought, amusement pushing aside her gloomy thoughts. She waited to see Mintkit dip his head so that his littermate could rest her muzzle on it.

Instead, Mintkit swiped one forepaw at Sandykit, his claws extended. "No!" he squealed. "I don't want to be a warrior! Mintwhiskers is a dumb name!"

"What?" Sandykit's eyes stretched wide with astonishment, though Poppystar could tell that she wasn't really surprised. This was all part of their game. "What do you want, then?" she asked.

"I want to live with Twolegs," Mintkit declared. "Then I won't have to hunt for food anymore, or sleep on moldy moss—with *your* paws in my mouth!" he added to his sister, drawing back his lips in a tiny snarl. "You take up far too much room!"

Paws pattered up behind Poppystar, and Waspwhisker appeared, to stand at the foot of the Rockpile with her neck fur bristling angrily. "Come down from there *at once*!" she ordered. "Sorry," she added, with an embarrassed glance at Poppystar.

"Don't worry about it," Poppystar responded as the kits came tumbling down from the pile of boulders. She knew she couldn't make an issue out of what she had just seen. *They were just playing, nothing more.* "If you don't want to be apprentices, that's fine," she told them, shrugging as if she didn't care. "If you don't want to learn how to hunt an climb trees and patrol the borders..."

"No! No!" Flamekit squeaked, jumping up and down. "We want to do all that."

"Please!" Mintkit begged. "It was only a game."

Sandykit and Creekkit just stood watching Poppystar, their eyes wide with dismay.

"Don't worry, kits," Poppystar mewed, brushing their heads gently with her tail. "I'm sure you'll all learn well when the time comes. Go with your mother now."

Trying to ignore the churning in her belly, Poppystar made for her den. But before she reached the bottom of the trail, she spotted Cherrytail again, crouched in the shadow of a boulder with Haze, Tinycloud, and Cinder. The soft murmur of their voices was cut off

as she padded past, and they all turned their heads to watch her.

What have they been discussing that they don't want me to hear?

Her pelt prickling, she wanted to stop and confront them. But she suspected she wouldn't get a straight answer, so she simply nodded and went on.

"I'm going to be the best at training!" she heard Flamekit boast behind her as Waspwhisker herded her rambunctious litter up to the nursery.

"No, I am!" Sandykit argued. "And I'll be so brave and loyal..."

It's true, they will. Their game today would be forgotten when the next adventure cropped up. Feeling more optimistic, Poppystar bounded up the trail to her den. Curling deep into the moss and bracken of her nest, she closed her eyes, but for the moment she didn't try to sleep. She tried to picture where Leafdapple might be now, and what his Twoleg den was like. *Is it like Snookthorn's nest, all hard-edged and shut away from the sky?*

Gradually sleep crept up on her and she imagined herself prowling around a Twoleg nest, wailing as she tried to get into Leafdapple's den. Her ears picked up the sound of cats padding softly with hushed whispers, and she imagined that kittypets were surrounding her, closing in, angry because she was invading their territory...

Poppystar's eyes flew open and she breathed a sigh of relief as she saw the familiar curved walls of her den, silvered by the moonlight seeping through the entrance. There were no hostile kittypets, but she could still hear the soft sounds of her dream. She rose to her paws, shaking moss from her pelt, and crept to the entrance of her den, poking her head out, she stared across the cliff face to the trail that led to the cliff top.

Cherrytail was padding up the narrow path, his tortoiseshell and white fur almost camouflaged against the cliff face in the icy light. Behind him were Haze, Stumpy, and Cory, and behind them several more of her warriors. They paused briefly to talk to Cinder, who was on watch halfway up the cliff, then continued silently up the

trail.

So many! Poppystar thought, staring at them in dismay. *Where is Cherrytail taking them?*

Chapter 30

For a few heartbeats Poppystar crouched frozen in the mouth of her den. Then, setting down her paws as lightly as if she was stalking a squirrel, she crept out and headed for the top of the cliff. She made a wide detour around Cinder, who was gazing down into the gorge, unaware that her leader was sneaking past her. The moon was a claw-scratch, low in the sky, giving just enough light for Poppystar to make out which of her warriors were following Cherrytail and the cats from the Twolegplace.

Rockshade, her black pelt no more than a moving shadow. Sharpclaw, her excited little bounce as she reached the cliff top giving her away. Tinycloud, his white fur glowing in the light.

Pulling herself up onto level ground, Poppystar paused, watching the patrol as it headed across the open ground to the Twolegplace. Their confident strides told her that they had done this any times before.

Leafdapple was right!

Creeping along with her belly fur brushing the grass, Poppystar followed, thankful that the breeze was blowing toward her; her scent wouldn't alert Cherrytail that she was tracking his paw steps. At the edge of the Twolegplace she hid behind a boulder and watched as Haze lined up the patrol along the edge of the Thunderpath.

"There's not as much chance of monsters after dark," the Twolegplace cat meowed. "But you still need to be careful. Don't look into their eyes. They can freeze you like a scared rabbit."

Who put you in charge? Poppystar wondered, thinking that Haze sounded like a mentor teaching a group of apprentices.

The growl of an approaching monster drowned out Haze's next words. It swept past, its glaring eyes angling over the row of cats;

Poppystar blinked as they were outlined as dark shapes against the dazzle.

When the noise had died away, Haze glanced both ways along the Thunderpath, then raised his tail. "Now!"

The patrol pounded over the black stone and vanished into the shadows on the opposite side. Poppystar followed more cautiously, forcing her legs not to shake as she crossed the hard surface of the Thunderpath. She had lost sight of the patrol, but their scent trail was fresh and strong; she followed it over a fence into an enclosed space behind a Twoleg nest, where she spotted them again, slinking alongside the stretch of flat, green grass under cover of the overhanging branches of bushes.

On the opposite side of the grass, Haze beckoned with his tail and hissed, "This way!" He slithered under a gate into an alley, and the rest of the patrol followed him, with Cory at the rear. The black tom seemed to be keeping a lookout; Poppystar shrank into the shadow of a holly bush until he too had vanished under the gate.

Bounding across the garden, she pressed herself close to the gate and peered between the wooden strips. The patrol was standing in a huddle a couple of fox-lengths away.

"Remember your paw steps sound louder when you're walking on stone," Haze warned. "You need to practice being completely silent."

"And use the shadows," Stumpy added.

Haze nodded. "Stumpy's right. Don't forget that your eyes reflect the light more here. Cats will spot you even in the shadows if your eyes are gleaming."

"Look sideways to check what's ahead," Cory advised.

Poppystar felt her pelt start to prickle as she listened. *Is Haze leading an attack on cats in the Twolegplace?* Horror rooted her paws to the ground. *They can't be targeting our daylight warriors! Cherrytail would never do that.* Then she remembered all the times Cherrytail had criticized the kittypets or left them out of Clan duties, and she

couldn't be sure.

As soon as the patrol moved off again, Poppystar slipped under the gate and followed, remembering what the Twolegplace cats had said about the best ways to hide. She kept to the shadows and turned her head to look sideways along the alley so that her eyes didn't catch the light full on. Her muscles were shrieking at her to leap forward and confront them, but she forced herself to watch and wait.

Haze led the patrol around a corner and halted in front of a high wall built of red stone. Orange light flooded over it from a glowing stone tree.

"If you can't reach the top of the wall in one leap, you have to learn how to grip it," Cory explained, his voice a low murmur. "It's not like a tree; you can't dig your claws in. But look at the lines where the stones are put together." He pointed with his tail. "There are tiny gaps in there. The trick is to drive your foreclaws into one set of gaps, and find another set to drive in your hind claws. Then you can push off and get to the top. Stumpy, show them."

The brown tabby she-cat nodded and took a few paces back to get a good run at the wall. Poppystar had to admire her graceful leap and the way she hung poised for a heartbeat on the smooth surface before she propelled herself higher and landed lightly on the flat top.

"Any cat want to try?" Haze asked.

Tinycloud nodded agreement, then took a run up to the wall as Stumpy had done. His jump was strong and focused, but his claws slipped on the stone and it took an undignified scramble before he could haul himself up to stand beside Stumpy. Sharpclaw followed him; her strong Skyclan haunches sent her flying upward, and she managed to push off again and reach the top of the wall on her second leap.

"You're lighter; it's easier for you," Tinycloud grumbled.

Poppystar watched as Rockshade tried the leap in her turn; the

black she-cat's claws scraped vainly at the stone and she slid back to the ground again, hissing in annoyance.

"Never mind," Haze consoled her. "You'll get it in the end."

"I hope so," Rockshade muttered. "It's all so different from what I'm used to."

Poppystar could understand why the young warrior would be embarrassed by failing at something that Twolegplace cats and even former kittypets could do. *But it doesn't seem as if Sharpclaw and Tinycloud remember much about being kittypets,* Poppystar thought. *They're nearly as nervous here as gorge born cats.*

"Meanwhile, we'll go this way," Haze meowed, leading the rest of the patrol along the bottom of the wall. A few fox-lengths farther on, he pushed his way between the wooden strips of a gate into the enclosed space beyond. The cats balancing on the wall jumped down to join their Clanmates.

Poppystar tracked their paw steps as Haze padded along a path of bare earth between leafy plants on either side, then headed through a gap in the fence opposite into the next space. Her pelt rose as she heard the loud barking of a dog inside the Twoleg nest.

"Dogs!" Rockshade's fur bristled and she turned to flee.

Poppystar crouched under a bush, afraid that the black warrior would run straight into her, but Haze slipped in front of her and blocked her.

"Don't worry," the gray tom mewed. "The dog won't come out."

Rockshade cast uneasy glances at the nest as the patrol padded across the garden. Once again Poppystar followed, clinging to the shadows, trying not to shiver as the terrifying barking went on. Suddenly the door at the back of the nest was flung open. The barking grew louder as the dog raced into the open: a lean, long-bodied animal, its gray pelt turned to silver in the moonlight.

Rockshade let out a panic-stricken yowl. "You said it wouldn't come out!"

"Sometimes they do!" Haze yowled in reply.

"Scatter!" Cory ordered. "It's easier here for one cat to hide on its own."

The patrol shot apart as the dog bounded among them; its teeth came within a whisker of grabbing Tinycloud's tail. Poppystar fled back the way she had come, clawing her way up the wooden side of a small den at the end of the garden and hauling herself up onto its flat roof. She crouched on the edge, watching the dog as it ranged around the grass, its jaws wide and its tongue lolling.

A voice growled behind her. "What are you doing here?"

Poppystar spun around. "Leafdapple!"

The mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom's gaze traveled over her; his expression was wary.

"I—I didn't know you came out at night," she stammered.

Leafdapple shrugged. "Sometimes. My housefolk's den isn't far away. But you still haven't answered my question," he went on, with an edge of hostility to his tone. "I thought you didn't believe me about Cherrytail's night visits here. And now you're taking part in one!"

"Of course I'm not taking part!" Poppystar retorted. "I saw them leaving the gorge, and I followed."

"So you believe me now?"

Poppystar twitched her whiskers. *I'm his Clan leader; he doesn't have the right to interrogate me!* "I didn't disbelieve you, okay? The important thing is, what are they doing?"

"I'm not sure," Leafdapple replied with another shrug. "I haven't seen them for a while. And it's not always the same cats that Cherrytail brings. Last time, it was Clovertail, Sparrowpelt, and Bouncefire."

Poppystar's anxiety rose. *How many cats are involved in this?*

"I've seen them crossing Thunderpaths," Leafdapple went on. "Back and forth, like they weren't going anywhere. And learning how to climb walls. But always in different places, as if they weren't targeting any cat in particular."

I've seen some of that myself, Poppystar realized, staring at Leafdapple. "They're *training*, aren't they?" she whispered. "But why? They would never launch an attack on the Twolegplace."

"You might not," Leafdapple meowed with a flick of his ears. "But maybe they would."

Poppystar wondered if he was right. She and Cherrytail had differences of opinion, but she could still trust him, couldn't she? The sharp fangs of her anxiety bit deeper. "I'm going to find Cherrytail and the others and ask him what's going on," she decided.

Leafdapple padded to her side as she crouched at the edge of the roof and gazed down, trying to work out where the patrol had gone. At least there was no sign of the dog anymore, and the door to the den was closed.

"I'm coming with you," Leafdapple told her.

"No—stay here," Poppystar responded.

She could see the hurt in Leafdapple's amber eyes. "I'm supposed to be your Clanmate," he protested. "Or doesn't that count when I'm not actually in the gorge?"

I don't have time for this right now, Poppystar thought. "This is an issue between me and Cherrytail," she told Leafdapple, trying to keep her voice crisp and impersonal. "No other cat."

Deep down, she wasn't sure that was entirely true. She was doubtful about turning up to challenge the others with a Twolegplace cat by her side. It would draw too much attention to the split in Skyclan, in spite of all her efforts to heal it.

"I see," Leafdapple murmured, in a tone that suggested he understood Poppystar's concerns only too well. He lifted his head,

his ears erect and his jaws parted to taste the air. "They went that way," he meowed after a moment, pointing with his tail.

"Thank you." Pooppystar was grateful for her Clanmate's familiarity with the sounds and scents of the Twolegplace. She wished she could tell him how much she wanted him to go with her. But it would cause only more trouble. "I'll see you in camp tomorrow."

Leafdapple didn't respond, but watched Poppystar as she leaped down from the roof. Before she headed across the grass in the direction he had shown her, she glanced over her shoulder to see him looking down at her. His eyes glowed with the harsh orange light that filled the Twolegplace. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. *Does he really think I don't need him?*

Trying to push Leafdapple out of her mind, Poppystar raced through the next fence, scrambling through dense shrubbery until she popped out at the edge of a path covered with sharp white stones. A moment later she slid back into hiding as a gray and white kittypet padded slowly along the edge of the path and disappeared through a small flap at the bottom of the door to the den.

The next enclosed space was filled with a strong scent of dog. With nowhere to hide, Poppystar slunk along the bottom of the fence on the tips of her paws in case she alerted the animal. Thankfully she spotted a gate, and squeezed through into another alley. Her heart was pounding and she halted for a moment to catch her breath in the shelter of a big green Twoleg thing with round black paws.

Snookthorn's housefolk had one of these, she remembered, wrinkling her nose with disgust. *That stank of crow-food, too.*

"Water won't do you any harm." Poppystar stiffened as she heard Haze's voice coming from somewhere up ahead. "Just roll in it. It will hide your scent."

"I don't *want* to hide my scent!" Rockshade's voice was horrified. "In the forest, Skyclan scent is something to be proud of. It's part of defending our territory."

"But you're not in your territory now, are you?" Cory pointed out

quietly.

Peering out from behind the Twoleg thing, Poppystar spotted the patrol at the corner of the alley where it joined a small Thunderpath. Harsh orange light spilled down from another of the stone trees, gleaming on the surface of a puddle. The acrid stench reached Poppystar, even drowning the scent of crow-food.

"Just roll," Cherrytail growled. "You're keeping us all waiting."

Poppystar heard the sounds of splashing as Rockshade lowered herself into the puddle and rolled over. Anger surged up inside her. She leaped out from her hiding place and stalked up to the patrol.

"What in Starclan's name is going on?"

Concentrating on Rockshade, none of the patrol had heard or scented her approach. They spun around to face her; behind them, Rockshade scrambled up out of the puddle, shaking herself to try to get rid of the water. Her black pelt was clumped and messy. Her eyes were clouded with guilt; Tinycloud and Sharpclaw looked uncomfortable, too, but the Twolegplace cats were quite calm.

Cherrytail was the first to speak. "What does it look like?" he meowed. "We're exploring Twoleg territory in case we ever need to fight here."

His confident reply took Poppystar by surprise. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You've been too busy," Cherrytail replied.

Meeting his calm green gaze, Poppystar barely managed to stop herself from raking her claws over his ears. Words exploded from her, fierce as a greenleaf storm. "Not too busy to know that my warriors are leaving the gorge at night! And why do we need to know how to fight in the Twolegplace? What are you planning?"

The cool look Cherrytail gave her made Poppystar feel as if she were some crazy elder with burrs in her pelt. "We're planning nothing," he meowed, as if that should have been obvious. "We're *preparing* for the future, which cannot be seen. Haze brought

knowledge that we don't have, and I thought it would make us even stronger."

Poppystar took a deep breath; with a massive effort she made herself calm down. Cherrytail was undermining her in front of her Clanmates, and widening the rift between these cats and the daylight warriors, but screeching and fighting was not the answer.

"Don't you think you're endangering our regular hunting and border patrols, if our cats are tired after being out all night?" she queried evenly.

"That's why we bring only two or three cats at a time," Cherrytail explained, his voice as patient as if he was telling a new apprentice how to stalk a mouse.

Poppystar could tell he thought she was making an antheap out of a single grain of dirt. Desperately she held on to her resolve to be calm, but it was growing harder with every breath she took. "You mean you do this regularly? I can't believe you'd go behind my back like this!" She heard her voice growing shrill, and forced herself to lower it. "I am the leader of Skyclan. Does the warrior code mean nothing to you?"

Cherrytail blinked. "It means everything. Which is why I want to learn how I can fight wherever I need to, so that I can protect my Clanmates."

Tension burning through her pelt, Poppystar took a paw step forward, so that she stood nose to nose with her deputy. "You should have told me what you were doing," she hissed. "You can't give one half of the Clan extra training and ignore the others."

"You mean the kitty warriors? It's not my problem if they aren't here for night training."

"That's not the issue, and you know it!" Poppystar crouched, lashing her tail; a red mist was filling her vision. *I can't believe Cherrytail brings everything back to this!*

She was about to spring, when Stumpy's quiet voice broke through

her fury. "Poppystar, wait." The brown tabby she-cat turned to Haze and addressed him. "Haze, please. It's time to tell them the truth."

"The long-legged gray tom glared at her, bristling. "*I'll* decide when it's time," he snapped.

Cory padded up to him and gave him a nudge on the shoulder. "Stumpy's right," he mewed. "The Skyclan cats deserve to know."

Haze hesitated a heartbeat longer, glancing at Cherrytail, then nodded. "It was my idea to train your cats to fight in a Twolegplace," he told Poppystar. "We didn't come here to join your Clan. We came because we need your help."

Chapter 31

Haze jumped onto the top of the wall and looked down into the Twoleg yard. His pelt prickled with uneasiness. The place should have been familiar, but it had been a long time since he had come this way, and he was unsettled by how much had changed.

That bush has grown much bigger, he thought, jumping at the unexpected throaty bark of a dog from the next garden. *And that dog was a yapping little puppy.*

Haze parted his jaws to taste the air and realized regretfully that the clump of catmint that once grew beside the door of the Twoleg nest had vanished. *It was the catmint that brought me here in the first place.* He had followed the scent and jumped down from the rough stone wall to bury his nose in the leaves. And a voice, quiet and wary, had spoken behind him...

"Why have you come here?" It was the same voice, but harsher than Haze remembered. A sleek, brown-furred she-cat had emerged from the nest and stood looking up at him, every hair on her pelt oozing hostility, her lips drawn back in a snarl.

Haze leaped down from the wall and faced her. "It's Harper."

The brown she-cat gave him a cautious look. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine, I think."

"What do you mean, you *think*?" The she-cat's claws slid out. "You promised you would look after her."

"Twig, I didn't come here to fight," Haze mewed wearily. "I know you made your choice, but our daughter needs our help."

Twig paused for a heartbeat, then waved her tail toward the low-growing branches of a bush. "Okay, come under here. I don't want my housefolk seeing you."

Haze pressed his belly to the ground and slid underneath the bush behind Twig. Memories pressed around him, clutched in the thick leafy scents. "Do you remember catching your first mouse here? You said you'd never tasted anything so good."

Twig flicked her ears. "That was a long time ago."

"I know. And then you made me go into your nest and try your Twoleg food, and you thought it was so funny when I spat it out." Haze let out a faint sigh. "How did we grow so far apart?"

"We share our daughter, nothing else," Twig replied coldly. "I thought you came to talk about her?"

"I did. There's a problem." As briefly as he could, Haze told his former mate about Swift and her followers, how they had moved into his part of the Twolegplace and were terrorizing the other cats, not allowing them to hunt. While he was talking, he looked in vain for any spark of sympathy in Twig's eyes.

"You chose to live like that, fighting for your food like foxes," she meowed when Haze had finished. "You can't stop other cats from moving in."

"That's not the point!" Haze snapped. "I'd be willing to share prey in a fair fight, but these cats seem intent on taking everything. Including Harper."

Twig's eyes stretched wide. "Have they stolen her?"

"Not exactly. But I think that Harper has become... attached... to one of Swift's cats."

"You mean she's fallen in love with a cat who lives by a different set of rules?" Mockery glittered in Twig's yellow eyes. "You wouldn't dream of doing anything like that, would you?"

Haze felt his fur prickle along his spine. "It's more than that. I think Harper helped those cats to plan a Twoleg attack on the alley where we sleep."

"Harper would never do that!" Twig hissed. Haze wasn't sure; he

knew his doubt must have shown in his eyes, because the brown she-cat went on, "Being in love doesn't change who you are! Do you distrust your own daughter, just because she had feelings?" More gently, she added, "Haze, you and I stayed true to ourselves, didn't we? I never told you I would give up my home for you, but that didn't mean I didn't love you. I gave you our daughter, remember?"

Haze looked down at the earth beneath his front paws. "And I've lost her!"

"No, you haven't," Twig meowed, stretching out her tail-tip to touch him on the shoulder. "You know exactly where she is. Go talk to her; maybe she doesn't even know about the attack in the alley."

"Oh, she knows." Haze slid his claws into the soil. "She was there—and she escaped just in time."

Twig's yellow eyes clouded. "You're assuming too much." She hesitated, then added, "You're planning to attack these cats, aren't you? Turn your daughter into a scrap of food to be fought over? Harper won't thank you for that. She knows her own mind."

And you know me—too well, Haze thought ruefully. "These cats know only about fighting."

"No. *You* know only about fighting." Twig started to crawl backward, retreating out of the shelter of the bush.

"Wait!" Haze called. "I... I thought you could talk to Harper."

"Me?" Twig's yellow eyes chilled. "Oh, no. My life is here, with my housefolk. Harper knows where I am if she wants to see me."

"You can't hide here with your kittypet slop while our daughter is in danger!"

"Why can't I? Are you going to force me to come with you? I've told you, Haze, what we did was a mistake. I will never understand the way you live."

"But—but you let me take Harper!" Haze hissed.

"I like my life the way it is," Twig replied. "A kit would have changed that. You told me that Harper would be safe, and I believe that she is. It's only your stubbornness and pride that put her in danger." Haze opened his jaws to protest, but Twig swept on. "You're just angry that she could do something that you don't want her to. Leave her be, or she'll end up hating you."

Not waiting for a reply, she slid out from under the bush and headed for her nest. By the time Haze scrambled out after her, she had vanished.

Shaking leaf mold from his pelt, Haze climbed the wall again and leaped down into the alley. As he landed, he spotted Cory sitting a few tail-lengths away, his tail wrapped over his paws.

"You followed me!" Haze snarled.

Cory cocked his head to one side. "We're in this together, Haze, whether you like it or not. What did Twig say?"

Haze padded along the alley to sit beside his friend. "She thinks I should leave Harper to make up her own mind."

"But it's more than that!" Cory meowed, shocked. "Our cats are being hurt, and we've lost Tracy, all thanks to Swift."

Haze gave him a long look. "I'm not going to let Twig think we're weak, okay?"

Cory let out an impatient huff, but made no comment. After a moment he went on, "Let's go. I've found a place where we can spy on Swift's camp."

Haze narrowed his eyes in surprise. "Where?"

"Follow me."

The two cats trekked across the Twolegplace until they reached the edge, where spindly trees grew up to the bank of a dirty shallow stream. Haze gazed out across the sluggish yellow water, wrinkling his nose at the scent of the Twoleg waste that choked the current. There was a scent of cat, too, coming most strongly from a heap of

Twoleg boxes tumbled at the water's edge; some of them leaned over the stream, their flimsy material growing soggy as the waves lapped against them.

"That's where Swift lives?" Haze murmured. "It's just about right for a mange-pelt like her!"

"Come up here," Cory urged him, waving his tail at a small wooden den a few fox-lengths from the river. "We don't want Swift to catch us."

He scrambled up the wall to the flat roof of the den, and Haze followed, hissing with annoyance as splinters of wood stuck in his belly fur. He flattened himself to the roof beside Cory and peered over the edge.

At first there were no cats to be seen. Then the side of one of the boxes flapped and Bear and Shelly emerged into the open. Haze let out a low growl as he remembered Bear's claws slashing across Tracy's face, ripping out her eye. The two cats padded a little farther up the bank to where another of the boxes cast a heavy patch of shade. Haze stiffened as he made out movement and the glint of eyes in the shadow.

"Swift is there!" he hissed.

Bear and Shelly stood in front of Swift for a few heartbeats. Haze could hear the murmur of their voices, but he was too far away to hear what they were saying. Then he glimpsed movement among the trees on the other side of the stream. His claws slid out, digging into the wooden roof, and he bunched his muscles as Harper and the dark ginger tom Red came into sight. Harper was carrying the limp body of a squirrel.

"Steady," Cory whispered, laying his tail across Haze's shoulders.

Though Haze burned to jump down into Swift's camp, yowling a challenge, he watched in silence as Harper and Red crossed the stream by a set of stepping stones. Harper was hanging back as if she was nervous—*and so she should be, going into Swift's camp!*—but Red seemed to be encouraging her.

Bear and Shelly dipped their heads coolly as Harper and Red approached: not welcoming Harper, but making no attempt to chase her away, either. Haze's ears strained to hear what they were saying. He managed to catch a few words; Red was introducing Harper to them.

"How do we know we can trust her?" Shelly asked.

"You know who her father is!" Bear put in spitefully.

Shelly said something else that Haze couldn't catch; then Harper stepped forward and laid her squirrel down at the two cats' paws.

"Look, she caught us a squirrel!" Red announced.

Memories flooded over Haze, of how he had taught his daughter to catch squirrels near their alley, and he sank his claws even farther into the roof. *Why is she doing this to me?*

Harper stood watching while Bear and Shelly crouched down to eat the squirrel. Meanwhile, Swift rose to her paws and emerged from the shadows, her gaze scorching Harper's gray and brown pelt. After a couple of heartbeats she mewed something to her; Harper nodded.

"She's asking her for information about us!" Haze snarled. "We have to stop them! Let's get the others." Spinning around, he jumped down from the den and headed back toward his own territory.

Cory caught up to him in a swift patter of paws. "We can't stop them," he warned. "Not on our own."

"We *are* on our own," Haze snapped. "If Twig is anything to go by, the kittypets around here aren't going to be any help."

"No, not kittypets," Cory replied. "But there are other cats we could ask, cats who are trained to fight and wouldn't flinch at killing to protect their home."

Haze halted.

"Do you remember those cats who came here just after the flood?" Cory continued. "From a forest downriver? They were on their way

to find other cats, weren't they? Just like them." His voice grew hopeful. "If we could find them, maybe they would help us to sort out Swift."

Haze stared at his friend. He remembered the tom with the sandy-colored pelt, who had lost his mate in the flood and was looking for her, full of strength and determination, even though he was exhausted from battling the water. His muscles had been strong and lean under his fur, and there was a glint in his eyes that Haze had never seen in a kittypet.

"You're right, Cory," he growled. "We must find those cats."

Chapter 32

Poppystar sat in the shadow of the Rockpile; Cherrytail, Haze, and his friends crouched around her as she listened to Haze describing battles and betrayals in his Twolegplace. She had sent Rockshade, Sharpclaw, and Tinycloud back to the warriors' den; the rest of the cats were asleep, except for Cinder, still keeping watch from a ledge halfway up the cliff.

A chill night breeze whispered down the gorge, though at the top of the rocks Poppystar could make out the first pale streaks of dawn. The moon had set, and the warriors of Starclan were fading.

"Please, will you help us?" Haze asked, bringing his story to a close. "You're the only hope we have."

Poppystar felt like a twig whirled around and around in the pool where the river poured out from the cave. Her pelt prickled with annoyance at the way she had been distracted from her discovery that Cherrytail was training her cats secretly at night.

There's no way I'm letting that go unchallenged!

"I need to think," she meowed. "Go to your den now, and I'll let you know what I decide."

Haze looked as if he was about to argue, but Stumpy touched him on the shoulder with her stumpy tail and jerked her head toward the path that led up to their den. Haze gave in and moved off, with Stumpy beside him; Cory dipped his head to Poppystar and murmured. "Thank you for listening," before he followed.

Poppystar was left with Cherrytail; the tortoiseshell and white tom was flexing his claws impatiently.

"I can't see that there's much to think about," he told her, once the Twolegplace cats were out of earshot. "We're going to help them, aren't we? We have the strength and the skills, and what Swift has

done is wrong."

Poppystar fixed him with a hard gaze. "Where in the warrior code does it say that we have to use our skills to help other cats? I'm sorry for what has happened to Haze and the others, but I don't see how it's Skyclan's responsibility."

"What?" Cherrytail gave a single lash of his tail. "Look at the way Haze and the others helped us with the rats! And they've hunted for us and carried out all the other warrior duties. Are you saying that Skyclan shouldn't be loyal to them?"

"It's not a matter of loyalty," Poppystar pointed out, determined to keep her temper. "Haze and his friends never intended to stay with us for good. Surely that means they're not warriors like us."

Cherrytail twitched his whiskers. "They're not the only cats to have a life outside the gorge."

"Why does it always have to come back to the daylight warriors?" Poppystar snapped. She took a couple of breaths and continued, "I said I'd think about it, and I will. But it will be *my* decision, Cherrytail."

Her deputy met her gaze, then nodded and headed off toward the warriors' den.

Poppystar watched him go, then climbed the trail to her own den and settled into her nest. But although she was tired, she couldn't seem to get comfortable in the moss and fern. Her paws prickled with restlessness; leaving the den again, she wandered up the gorge in the growing light of dawn. As she rounded the spur of rock before the training area, she spotted Skywatcher sitting on the edge of the sandy circle; the warrior of Starclan looked up as if she had been waiting for her.

"Greetings, Poppystar," she meowed. "You are troubled."

Poppystar dipped her head. "Greetings, Skywatcher. Do you know what's happening? What the Twolegplace cats want us to do?"

"I do." Skywatcher swept her starry tail around, beckoning

Poppystar to sit beside her. "You must feel as though these visitors have been using Skyclan for their own ends."

"Yes!" Poppystar exclaimed, warmed by the spirit cat's sympathy. "That's exactly how it feels."

"But they have been loyal to their adopted Clan," Skywatcher went on. "They have hunted and fought for you. Remember the rats, and the cruel Twoleg, and the wounded Twoleg kit? Other Clans would help one another in times of great need."

"You mean the forest Clans?" Poppystar checked. "They didn't exactly help Skyclan in the end, did they?"

Skywatcher shrugged. "Maybe this is your chance to show forgiveness, to prove that Skyclan has recovered and grown stronger from that time, and can show mercy of its own."

Poppystar didn't have a chance to reply before she glimpsed a movement among the rocks above the training area, and a black she-cat bounded into the open. The fur on her neck started to rise, thinking that a rogue was invading the gorge, until she spotted the glitter of stars around her paws.

The newcomer stormed up to Skywatcher, her ears flat with fury, her eyes blazing. "No mercy!" she snarled. "Skyclan has to survive alone! These intruders do not deserve to be warriors if all they ever wanted was our strength and experience to fight their battle." She spun around and fixed her burning gaze on Poppystar. "Skyclan cannot leave the gorge!"

Skywatcher reached out with her tail in a calming gesture. "Swallowflight," she meowed, "you are blinded by the wounds that were given to you long ago."

"It was a wound from which we never recovered," Swallowflight hissed.

"But the Clan did recover." Skywatcher nodded to Poppystar. "Look, it's back where it belongs, in the gorge that you found."

"This is not a true Clan!" Swallowflight spat. "How many of them

are kittypets, refusing to leave their pampered nests of slop and Twolegs fawning over them? Their leader doesn't even know where half of them are when she's asleep."

Anger and horror flooded through Poppystar. "That's not true!" she whispered, rising to her paws and backing away. *Or is there a truth there that I dare not admit?*

She looked at Skywatcher for support, but the gray she-cat did not speak. Instead, she leaped at Swallowflight, knocking her over and rolling her in the sand. Swallowflight fought back viciously, her hind paws scrabbling at Skywatcher as she tried to sink her teeth into the gray cat's neck.

Skywatcher let out a screech. Poppystar jumped at the noise, and found herself back in her own nest, scrabbling among the moss and bracken.

"It was a dream!" she gasped, struggling for deep breaths to steady the pounding of her heart.

Sunlight poured into her den, and from outside she could hear the movement and voices of cats going about the tasks of the new day. She sat up and started to groom her pelt, feeling as if every hair of it was tangled and filthy.

A few heartbeats later a shadow fell across the sunlight as Echosong popped his head into the den. "Are you okay?" he meowed. "It's late; I thought you might be sick."

"No, I'm fine," Poppystar replied, her voice still shaky.

She was lying. Her dream clung to the corners of her mind and Swallowflight's challenge echoed off the walls around her. How many Starclan warriors felt the same scorn for her Clan of daylight warriors? *Have I really gone so far wrong?*

Then she reminded herself that Skywatcher had been ready to fight on her behalf. And Spottedleaf, Birdstar, Cloudstorm, and Fawnstep had all encouraged her. *Maybe Swallowflight, whoever she is, has her own problems.*

Even so, she was unsettled by the knowledge that Starclan cats would fight among themselves. Poppystar had been taught by Sandstar to rely on the wisdom of her warrior ancestors, and she had never seen such rage unleashed among their own ranks before now. Two sides to an argument meant that one side had to be wrong, didn't it? So which cats was she supposed to listen to?

Great Starclan, what am I going to do if I can't even trust you?

Poppystar followed Echosong down toward the river. The sun was climbing into a clear sky, filling the gorge with warmth. Even the rocks were hot under Poppystar's pads as she made her way down the trail.

Waspwhisker's kits were sprawled in a patch of shade at the foot of the cliff, with their mother standing over them.

"But we don't want to clean out the nursery," Mintkit was complaining. "It's too hot."

"I just want to sleep," Flamekit murmured drowsily.

"That's too bad," Waspwhisker meowed, giving the nearest kit a prod with one paw. "The nursery won't clean itself."

"Why can't the apprentices do it?" Sandykit argued.

Waspwhisker's eyes widened and she let out a shocked hiss. "Don't be so lazy!" she scolded her daughter. "You're old enough to do it yourselves now. Come along right away, and don't let me hear another word from any of you!"

Groaning and muttering under their breath, the four kits hauled themselves to their paws and trudged up the path, with Waspwhisker right behind.

That must be the first time I've seen those kits when they weren't bouncing around, Poppystar thought, amusement driving away some part of her worries. She spotted Patchfoot stumbling awkwardly down from the new birthing den and padding over to Echosong.

Her black and white fur was clumped and untidy.

"I feel as if my belly's going to burst!" she complained to the medicine cat. "And this heat isn't helping at all."

"I know, it's hard for you when it's time for your kits to come," Echosong soothed her. "Come and sleep outside my den—there's a cool and shady patch there. And I'll give you some borage; that should help."

"Thank you, Echosong," Patchfoot mewed, limping off behind the medicine cat. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

Blinking approvingly, Poppystar turned toward the Rockpile, where Cherrytail was sorting out the patrols. Her deputy didn't speak to her, but gave her a cautiously cordial nod. Poppystar returned the gesture, though she was still unhappy that they hadn't yet discussed the way he had kept secrets from her. All four Twolegplace cats were standing in a cluster at one side. They seemed more subdued than usual; Poppystar wondered if they had given up all hope of finding help. A pang of guilt stabbed through her. *I wish I knew what was the right thing to do.*

She was still pondering when the daylight warriors appeared at the top of the gorge. No cheerful yowling announced their arrival this morning; the heat seemed to be affecting them, too, as they padded down the trail with Leafdapple in the lead.

As the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom approached Poppystar he gave her an inquiring look and cocked his head toward Cherrytail. Even in the hot sunlight, a chill ran through Poppystar. Leafdapple obviously wanted to know what had happened after she left him the night before. She felt like a coward for turning away from him. *But what can I say to him? I'm not even sure myself what this all means.*

"It's so hot!" Amber complained, her paws dragging as she headed toward Cherrytail. 'Do we have to hunt in this weather?"

"Yeah, I feel as if my pelt is burning," Harleymoon added.

Cherrytail opened his jaws for a scathing retort, but Poppystar forestalled him. She was grateful to Harleymoon and Amber for distracting her from Leafdapple, and she noticed that their pelts were especially thick. They were probably feeling the heat more than their Clanmates.

"Waspwhisker is cleaning out the nursery," she meowed. "Why don't you fetch her some fresh moss from the cave? It must be nice and cool in there."

"Great! Thanks, Poppystar," Amber responded, waving her tail to beckon Harleymoon. "Let's go!"

"Be careful of the path—it's slippery!" Poppystar reminded them as they climbed the Rockpile. She turned back to Cherrytail, expecting some complaint that she was favoring the kittypets, but her deputy said nothing.

The last patrols were leaving: Poppystar slipped alongside Shrewtooth as she led Cobaltclaw and Frecklepaw toward the Rockpile. "Mind if I join you?" she asked.

Shrewtooth blinked in pleasant surprise. "We'd be glad to have you, Poppystar," she meowed, dipping her head and falling back to let her take the lead.

"No, *you* lead, Shrewtooth," Poppystar instructed.

She noticed Cobaltclaw giving her a pleased look, and remembered how concerned the black tom had been that Shrewtooth wasn't getting on well in the Clan. She was doing better now, Poppystar reflected, as the young black she-cat led the way across the heap of boulders and up the opposite side of the gorge. She was carefully checking each marker, tasting the air for any unfamiliar scents, and sending Cobaltclaw to check on a hole that had opened up among the roots of an oak tree.

"I think it's just fallen earth," the black tom reported. "There's no scent of anything but leaves and beetles."

Poppystar began to relax as the patrol continued along the border.

The thick green leaves overhead sheltered them from the worst of the heat; the forest floor was dim and cool, and the long grass crushed refreshingly against her pelt.

This is how Clan life should be.

Suddenly Shrewtooth halted, her ears pricked. "I hear something!" she announced.

Gazing around for the source of the sound, Poppystar spotted a hollow tree just across the border. Bees were flying in and out of a hole high up in the trunk. Their low-pitched humming was what had alerted Shrewtooth.

"Bees!" Frecklepaw exclaimed, his whiskers quivering. "Honey is so good for soothing sore throats. And for binding poultices together."

Poppystar couldn't resist a glance at Cobaltclaw, expecting to see the black tom looking annoyed. Instead, she caught a resigned eye-roll from Frecklepaw's mentor. *Maybe Frecklepaw is meant to be a medicine cat after all.*

"No, Frecklepaw! Get back!"

Shrewtooth's urgent yowl made Poppystar jump. She spun around to see that Frecklepaw had started to climb the tree, his gaze fixed on the hole in the trunk. Shrewtooth's warning startled the apprentice; he lost his balance and grabbed at the nearest branch.

There was a loud crack. The branch Frecklepaw was holding gave way, and she half fell, half leaped to the ground in a tumble of mottled brown fur. The low humming of the bees grew to a high-pitched, angry buzzing. More and more of them poured out of the hole in a swelling cloud, reaching out toward the cats like a dark paw.

"Run!" Poppystar screeched.

She pushed the dazed Frecklepaw in front of her as the patrol fled back to the gorge. Her heart pounding as the striped black and yellow bodies whirled around her head, and she braced herself for the stab of their vicious stings. The swarm pursued them all the

way, a threatening storm that hovered over them, occasionally darting down in a noisy frond to strike. Cobaltclaw let out a yowl as a bee stung his ear, flailing his tail wildly to try to keep them off.

As the patrol bounded over the Rockpile, the cats who still remained in the gorge sprang up in alarm. Patchfoot, roused from a doze outside Echosong's den, let out a terrified wail. Tangle and Lichenfur slid out their claws as if this was an enemy they could attack. Echosong shot out of his den and gazed upward, his fur bristling.

"Into the water!" Poppystar yowled. "Quick!"

As her paws hit the ground at the foot of the Rockpile she launched herself at Tangle and Lichenfur, pushing them into the river. Tangle let out an outraged screech that ended in a splutter as Lichenfur shoved her head under. Echosong was helping Patchfoot. Shrewtooth, Cobaltclaw, and Frecklepaw ran into the water without breaking stride and ducked their heads under the surface.

Poppystar followed them, crouching at the edge of the river with just her nose and eyes out of the water. She shivered at the cold touch of the current that threatened to carry her off her paws. *Thank Starclan that most of the Clan are out on patrol! And that Waspwhisker and her kits are safely in the nursery!*

The bees buzzed furiously overhead; Poppystar thought she could hear their frustration that their prey had escaped. They circled around the pool, hovering low over the surface, but there was nothing for them to attack. After what felt like several moons, the swarm bunched together again and flew away.

Poppystar hauled herself out of the pool; her fur felt heavy and water streamed from it, pooling around her paws. The rest of her Clanmates dragged themselves onto the bank; they looked thin and bedraggled with their pelts plastered to their sides.

"What were you trying to drown me for?" Tangle snapped at Lichenfur.

"Next time I'll let you get stung," the old tom muttered.

Echosong was staring around at the drenched cats, speechless with shock. Poppystar couldn't understand what was bothering him; he was usually far quicker than this to react to an emergency.

"Hey, what happened?"

The voice came from the other side of the river; Poppystar looked up to see Harleymoon and Amber, carrying bundles of moss from the cave and staring down in amazement at their sodden Clanmates.

"Bee attack," Tangle grunted.

"Bee attack?" Harleymoon echoed, her eyes bulging from her head. "How did that happen?"

"It was an accident, but it's over now. Take the moss to Waspwhisker," Poppystar told the daylight warriors. "Tell her to keep her kits in the nursery in case there are any bees hanging around. I'll come up and see them in a moment."

As Harleymoon and Amber raced off, Poppystar realized that almost all the cats were hurt. Patchfoot had a sting dangerously close to her eye; it was swelling fast as she pawed at it with whimpers of pain. Cobaltclaw was circling, trying to reach a bite on his rump, while Shrewtooth was biting at her forepaw in a vain attempt to get the sting out.

Poppystar padded over to Echosong. "Don't these cats need help?" she prompted, giving the medicine cat a gentle prod on his shoulder.

Echosong jumped. "Yes, of course. Sorry, Poppystar." He padded forward, beckoning his Clanmates with his tail. "Line up here so I can take your stings out," he instructed. "Don't scratch them; you'll only make it worse. Frecklepaw, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine," the apprentice replied, pattering up.

"Then you can help me. Go into my den and fetch some blackberry leaves."

Frecklepaw gave himself a good shake, scattering water droplets

everywhere, before plunging into Echosong's den.

Seeing that everything was under control, Poppystar padded away to check on the nursery. "Come and see me later!" Echosong called after her.

Poppystar waved her tail in acknowledgement and headed up the trail. To her relief, none of the swarm had found their way into the nursery.

"It's not fair!" Sandykit complained. "We never got to see the bees."

"Trust me, you don't want to," Waspwhisker assured her. "We're very lucky that we were safe in here."

When Poppystar returned to the bottom of the gorge, she discovered that Cherrytail had returned with his hunting patrol; Shrewtooth was reporting on how Frecklepaw had disturbed the bees.

"It's a good thing it was no worse," Cherrytail commented, glancing over to where Echosong was treating the cats who had been stung. "Do you think we should do something?" he asked Poppystar as she padded up.

"I don't think there's anything we can do," Poppystar replied, "unless you want to try moving a whole swarm of bees. No, we'll just have to stay well clear, and reset the border markers to keep all the cats away from the trees."

Cherrytail let out an annoyed hiss. "You're right—but I hate losing territory."

"Poppystar! Poppystar!" Frecklepaw came bounding over, his eyes wide and troubled, the sharp scent of blackberry leaves clinging to his fur. "I'm so sorry. It was all my fault. It was stupid to climb that tree."

Poppystar touched the apprentice's shoulder with the tip of her tail. "It wasn't the best idea you've ever had, but you were right that honey is very useful for Echosong. It's a pity we can't get any from there."

"Next time think before you act, or ask your mentor," Cherrytail added, though he didn't sound as scathing as Poppystar had expected, seeing that he was speaking to a daylight warrior.

Frecklepaw nodded. "I will, I promise."

Poppystar glanced toward the medicine cat's den to see that he had finished treating the injured cats: Shrewtooth was just limping away from him, to flop down beside the river and begin to groom her damp fur.

At least the sun will soon dry us off, Poppystar thought.

She bounded over to the medicine cat's den as Echosong was heading inside with the remains of the blackberry leaves. "You wanted to talk to me?" she asked.

"Yes, I—" Echosong broke off, staring at Poppystar's shoulder. "You've got a sting in there," he murmured. "Hold still while I get it out."

"I never even realized," Poppystar meowed, while Echosong parted her fur and delicately removed the sting with his teeth.

The medicine cat chewed up some of the blackberry leaves and patted the poultice on Poppystar's shoulder. "The bee attack meant something else," he told Poppystar while his head was still bent over the wound. "It was a sign."

Poppystar blinked. "What sort of sign? Does it mean that Frecklepaw shouldn't be a medicine cat?"

Echosong shook his head. "No, it's more serious than that." Hesitating, he stared out across the gorge, as if he was seeing something more distant than the cliffs opposite. "It was definitely a sign," he went on at last, "but I don't know exactly what it means. Maybe you do."

He cast a glance at Poppystar as if he was acknowledging that they hadn't been so close lately, that Poppystar might well know something that she hadn't shared with her medicine cat. Poppystar couldn't think of anything to say. She hasn't been keeping secrets

from Echosong, has she? *He doesn't know you saw Leafdapple in the Twolegplace last night.*

"There is trouble somewhere, far off now. A great battle between cats who believe they are right and cats who believe they have been wronged beyond all measure." Echosong spoke unexpectedly, in a voice that sounded as if it was coming from far away. "If we don't act, it will come to us. A force of pain and violence, seething with rage, will come right into the gorge, and there will be no escape, not even the river. Our Clan will be devastated, and the quarrel will become ours."

Poppystar felt a chill run through her from ears to tail-tip, as if a storm cloud had covered the sun. *Echosong, no. Don't tell me this...*

Echosong looked at his leader, his gorgeous green eyes troubled. "Does that make any sense to you?" he asked, his voice sounding normal again. "Is there a battle we can fight somewhere else, before it comes to our camp?"

Chapter 33

Poppystar fluffed up her fur against the dawn chill. The sky was pale gold where the sun would come up, but shadows still lay thick in the gorge. From where she sat on the Rockpile, she could watch her warriors as they slipped silently out of their dens and gathered beside the pool.

She and Cherrytail had arrived first, followed almost at once by the four Twolegplace cats. They stood huddled together; Poppystar remembered the hope that flared in their eyes when she gave them her decision the night before; now they just looked anxious, murmuring quietly to one another.

Tinycloud and Sharpclaw stood side by side, their pelts brushing, while Shrewtooth paced nervously up and down the riverbank. Poppystar hoped she was right to include the young black she-cat on this mission. *But she's started to show such promise. I want to give her a chance to prove herself.*

Rockshade was saying farewell to her littermates, Bouncefire and Sparrowpelt. "I guess we'll be back in a few days," she meowed, trying and failing to sound cheerful.

"It's not fair!" Sparrowpelt exclaimed enviously. "Why do you get to go and we don't?"

There was a sudden patter of paws as Waspwhisker's kits scampered down the trail and hurled themselves at Fallowfern while he was padding toward the meeting place.

"No! You can't go!" Sandykit squealed.

"We'll miss you." Mintkit pushed his head into his father's shoulder. "What if you never come back?"

All four kits set up a loud wail.

"That's enough," Fallowfern told them, nuzzling each kit in turn. "Of course I'm coming back. And you have to look after your mother while I'm away. Make sure you do everything she tells you."

"We will!" Creekkit promised.

Fallowfern's gaze met his mate's as Waspwhisker padded up to him. "Take care," she whispered.

"Of course I will." The two cats stood with their tails twining for a moment before Fallowfern turned away and went to join Cherrytail and the others.

Poppystar's whiskers twitched as she spotted a pale shape slipping into the midst of the cats. *What's Egg doing? I said that no apprentices were to come.* She thought that the cream she-cat was trying to stay unnoticed, but Cherrytail's eyes were sharper than that.

"Egg? What are you doing here? Didn't you hear Poppystar say no apprentices?"

Egg shouldered through the cluster of cats until she could face her mentor. "But Cherrytail—"

"I don't have time for this," the deputy interrupted, waving her away with a swift lash of his tail.

"I've been in Twolegplace before," Egg went on, her voice growing louder until Poppystar could hear her clearly from where she stood on the Rockpile. "And I'm just as old and strong as some of the warriors, even though I haven't finished my training. You *know* this, Cherrytail. You said as much when I did my assessment the other day."

Cherrytail paused, unusually hesitant, while his gaze traveled over the young she-cat. "That's true..."

"I really want to come." Egg kneaded the ground with her forepaws. "I want to prove my loyalty to Skyclan."

Cherrytail hesitated for a heartbeat longer, then turned to look up at Poppystar. "What do you think?"

Poppystar gazed down at the eager apprentice. It was true that she was strong; her thin frame had filled out since she had lived with the Clan, and her muscles swelled beneath her sleek pelt. And she had watched her in training; she was swift and agile in battle, easily outmatching the other apprentices.

"Very well," she meowed. "You can come, Egg. But remember, Cherrytail is your mentor. You must do as he tells you."

"I will!" Egg promised, her eyes shining. "Thanks, Poppystar, Cherrytail. You won't be sorry." She dipped her head to Poppystar and went to stand beside Rockshade.

The cats who were to leave the gorge were all gathered beside the pool, their Clanmates standing a little way off to bid them farewell. Cherrytail padded over to Clovertail, who would be in charge while the Clan leader and the deputy were away. Poppystar could see that Cherrytail was giving the light brown tom some final instructions, but they were too far away for her to hear what they said.

Tension hung over the gorge like mist. Poppystar could read it in the bristling fur and jerky movements of the cats who were leaving, and in the somber gazes of those who were left behind. Letting out a long sigh, she lifted her head to the fading stars. "Please let this be the right thing to do," she murmured. "Bring all my cats home again."

"For what it's worth, *I* think you're doing the right thing."

For a heartbeat, Poppystar thought that a warrior of Starclan had answered her. Then she recognized the voice; opening her eyes, she spun around to see Leafdapple standing on the Rockpile a little way below her. Her heart swelled with joy as she realized that he was looking at her warmly, if with a wariness that she hadn't seen before.

"It means a lot, actually," she managed to reply, giving him a nod of welcome. "Thank you."

Leafdapple stepped up onto the rock beside her. "I—I want to apologize," he meowed.

Surprise rippled through Poppystar. "What for?"

"I wasn't fair to you," the mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom replied. "Above everything else, you are the leader of Skyclan. Which means you are my leader, and you have my loyalty, always."

Poppystar caught her breath. Did this mean he had forgiven her for being bound by her duty to their Clan? She longed to brush her pelt against Leafdapple and twine her tail with his, but this was not the time. Lowering her head, she murmured, "Thank you."

"I want to come with you," Leafdapple announced.

Poppystar blinked in surprise. "You don't have to."

"Why?" Leafdapple's voice was challenging. "Because I'm half kittypet? But I'm half warrior, too. And when I'm here, I'm *all* warrior. As one of your warriors, I wish to help these cats."

Poppystar gazed at him. Suddenly she felt more confident at the idea that she could set out on this mission with Leafdapple beside her. She had never considered including the daylight warriors. This wasn't like leaving them out of Clan activities, this was a dangerous expedition into unknown territory, and that made it harder for the kittypets than for any other cat.

"What about your housefolk?"

"You mean if I don't come back?" Leafdapple's amber gaze burned into Poppystar. "I have no more to lose than any of my Clanmates. We all have something precious that we risk losing every time we fight."

Poppystar could not meet that intense stare. She turned her head away, and Leafdapple let out a small trill of satisfaction, as if he recognized that she had agreed.

Down below, Cherrytail was gathering the patrol together, ready to head downstream. Echosong had emerged from his den and was distributing traveling herbs to give the warriors strength for their journey.

"It's time to go," Poppystar mewed.

She leaped down from the Rockpile, as Leafdapple was about to follow he checked and pointed with his tail at a dead mouse that she had left lying at the very summit of the rocks. "You forgot your fresh-kill."

Poppystar glanced back. "Some other cat will eat it." *Starclan, please take this food and watch over us.*

Cherrytail flicked his ears in surprise at Leafdapple's presence as he and Poppystar joined the patrol. Poppystar nodded, braced to argue with her deputy, but he made no comment.

"Haze, you lead the way," he ordered, waving his tail at the Twolegplace cat.

Haze padded downriver until he could cross by the stepping stones. As the patrol lined up to follow, Stumpy paused in front of Poppystar.

"Thank you for doing this," she meowed.

"Thank us all later," Poppystar responded.

She was waiting for her turn to cross when Echosong came over to her with a mouthful of traveling herbs. He looked even more troubled than when he had told Poppystar about the sign on the previous day. Poppystar knew that he felt entirely responsible for Skyclan's getting involved in the problems of the Twolegplace cats.

"I know this is what Starclan wants us to do," Poppystar reassured him, wishing that she felt as certain as she sounded. "They will watch over us."

Echosong nodded, though his troubled gaze did not clear. "May Starclan light your path," he whispered as he stretched forward to touch noses with his Clan leader. "I will await your return."

Poppystar dipped her head and joined the long line of cats who were crossing the river and climbing the trail that led out of the gorge.

The sun rose before the cats had gone far along the edge of the cliffs. The pale blue of the sky deepened; fluffy white clouds floated across it on a gentle breeze. Poppystar silently thanked Starclan that they had good weather for traveling.

As sunhigh approached they left the forest behind and the cliffs sank away until the cats were walking along a pebbly path beside the river. There was a roaring in the air that gradually grew louder.

"What's that?" Poppystar asked.

"A waterfall," Stumpy replied.

Poppystar's paws tingled. "Do we have to climb down it?"

The brown tabby she-cat shook her head. "No, there's another way, but it took us ages to find it when we were on our way here."

She had hardly finished speaking when the patrol came to the top of the waterfall. The river fell over it in a smooth curve and plunged into a pool far below that churned and foamed, filling the air with fine mist. Jagged rocks poked out of the water on either side. Beside the river the ground fell away in a sheer cliff; Poppystar scanned it, but she could see hardly any paw holds that would help a cat trying to climb down, nothing but a few scrubby bushes too far apart to be of any use.

"This way," Haze called, waving his tail. He led the patrol along the top of the cliff until it gradually began to slope down, and the ground sprouted gorse and thick clumps of heather rather than bare rock, slick with moss.

"We can get down here," the gray tom announced. "Follow me and watch where you're putting your paws."

The cats straggled out into a long line as they followed Haze down the slope. The ground underpaw was treacherous; there was unexpected dips and hollows, and places where the ground crumbled away under the weight of a single paw. Poppystar found it tough to force her way through the tightly woven heather stems, and the thorns of the gorse bushes raked her pelt. Every cat was

exhausted by the time they reached the bottom and headed back to the river.

"Let's rest," Cherrytail suggested. "And we might take some time to hunt."

Poppystar nodded, though the Twolegplace cats didn't look happy; she guessed that they wanted to force the pace as much as they could, to get back to their home all the sooner.

But that's not going to happen. What use will it be, if we're all worn out when we get there?

When they went on, the path beside the river became smooth and sandy, easier on their paws. They passed a clump of elder bushes, and followed a curve to see several Twoleg nests standing beside a round, shallow pool.

"Is that your Twolegplace?" Tinycloud asked Cory.

"No, ours is much bigger than that," Cory told him, adding discouragingly, "and we've got a long way to go yet."

Haze led them away from the river, skirting the Twoleg nests in a wide circle. Twilight was gathering by the time they came to a small Thunderpath and halted at the edge.

"At least when it's getting dark you can see the monsters' eyes," Fallowfern murmured.

But everything was dark and quiet, and they crossed the Thunderpath without any problems.

"It's time we made camp for the night," Poppystar announced when they reached the other side. "Haze, do you know any good places?"

"Yes, but we'll have to get away from these Twoleg nests first."

Haze brought them to a spot where the riverbank sloped down steeply and there were hollows among the roots of trees that shaded the water. Poppystar fell asleep with the gentle gurgle of the current in her ears.

The cats rose at dawn; there was plenty of prey among the trees, and they hunted successfully before carrying on. Not long after sunhigh they came to open fields, with Twoleg nests here and there at a safe distance. Poppystar relaxed and enjoyed the warmth as they padded through lush grass at the edge of the river.

"What are those?" Shrewtooth whispered, waving her tail at a group of huge short-haired animals who stood in the grass several fox lengths away; their pelts were black and white, and they chewed placidly as their gaze followed the cats.

"Cows," Cory replied. "Don't worry; they're not dangerous."

But even Poppystar felt doubtful when a couple of the beasts padded over and snuffled curiously at her and her Clanmates. *Their feet are so big and hard, like yellow rocks!* Cherrytail snapped out an order to pick up the pace, and to Poppystar's relief the cows didn't follow them as they bounded away.

Sliding under a fence made of shiny tendrils strung between wooden uprights, the patrol came to a field that at first glance seemed to be empty. The ground sloped upward to the horizon; the rough clumps of grass were shorter, with the occasional outcrop of rock.

"I don't like this," Rockshade muttered to Egg. "It's too quiet."

Almost before she had finished speaking, the silence was broken by the barking of a dog. The cats froze, the sound grew rapidly louder, and the dog bounded over the brow of the hill: a massive creature with a rough, gingery pelt. Its tail flapped and its barking rose to a high-pitched yapping as it made for the cats.

"Run!" Shrewtooth yowled.

But there was nowhere to run to. The fields stretched away, empty in all directions. There were no fences or walls in sight, not even a tree to climb.

"No!" Poppystar ordered, aware that at any moment the patrol would panic and scatter. "Hide—here, under the bank."

Cherrytail went first, launching himself over the grassy edge before any cat had a clear idea of what they might find there. "It's all right!" he yowled when he was out of sight. "Come on!"

Poppystar stood guard, her claws extended and her lips drawn back in a snarl as the dog hurtled toward her. "Stay back, flea-pelt!" she spat.

The dog hesitated just long enough for the rest of the patrol to bundle themselves over the edge of the bank. Poppystar leaped after them and found herself on a narrow pebbly stretch of ground, washed by the river. Grass and foliage hung over the water, making it harder to see them from above.

The patrol huddled together, staring upward, while the dog ran up and down above their heads, whining and snuffling. Poppystar knew it would be only a moment before it tracked them by their scent and launched itself down on top of them.

Then what do we do? Swim?

To her relief she heard the sound of a Twoleg voice, raised in a loud yowl. It sounded angry. The dog went on whining and searching for a moment more; then Poppystar heard its receding paw steps. Its scent began to fade.

"That was close!" Tinycloud panted.

Poppystar warned her cats to wait a few heartbeats more to make sure that the dog had gone before they climbed back onto the bank. Egg hung back, gazing into the water; then she darted a paw into the stream and hooked out a fish that flopped and wriggled on the stretch of pebbles until she killed it with a bite to the neck.

"Egg, that was brilliant!" Leafdapple exclaimed. "Where did you learn to fish like that?"

The young she-cat ducked her head modestly. "I used to stay beside the river sometimes."

She lugged her catch up into the field and the whole patrol crowded around to share it. The fish was big enough for every cat to have a

few bites.

"That was good," Cherrytail meowed, swiping his tongue around his jaws. "It looks as if we were right to bring you, Egg."

The cream-colored she-cat's eyes shone with pride. *Cherrytail was right all along,* Poppystar mused. *Skyclan is stronger for having Egg with us.*

By the time the patrol had finished eating, the sun was sliding down the sky and there was a chill in the air.

"We'd better look for somewhere to spend the night," Cherrytail meowed. "Haze, do you know of anywhere safe where that dog won't bother us?"

Haze looked doubtful. "We've only been this way once before," he reminded the deputy. "We'll just have to hope the Twoleg keeps the dog shut up at night."

The patrol plodded beside the river until they came to a thick hedge. Beyond it was another field; Poppystar peered through the thorny branches and spotted more of the gigantic black and white cows.

"I think we should stop here," she decided. "We probably won't find anywhere better. If we sleep under the hedge the branches should keep us safe from the dog."

"All the same, we should set a watch." Cherrytail stretched his jaws in a vast yawn. "I'll go first, and wake one of you later on."

He sat just outside the hedge, his gaze scanning the field and the river; Poppystar stood beside him while the rest of the patrol crawled into shelter underneath the branches.

"Ow!" Sharpclaw gave a hiss of annoyance. "I've just put my paw on a thorn."

"Then watch where you're putting it, mouse-brain," Tinycloud muttered. "And take your tail out of my ear."

Once her warriors were settled, Poppystar crept under the hedge and managed to make a nest for herself among the dead leaves. *It's not going to be a comfortable night,* she realized with an inward sigh. *My pelt feels as if it's full of thorns.*

She jumped at a low-pitched, sorrowful noise coming from the other side of the hedge. Shrewtooth, curled up close by, raised her head with her eyes stretched wide. "What was that?"

As the noise came again, Leafdapple stuck his head out of the branches on the other side. "Don't worry," he reported. "It's only one of those cows."

"Well, I hope they're not going to keep it up all night," Rockshade snapped from farther down the hedge. "I want to get some sleep."

Poppystar closed her eyes and wrapped her tail over her nose. For a few heartbeats the noise of the cows disturbed her, but gradually she slipped into sleep.

Mist surged around her; she couldn't see more than a tail-length beyond her muzzle. Damp grass brushed her pelt and the gurgle of the river over stones sounded unnaturally loud. *Where am I?* she wondered, knowing that she was dreaming. *Starclan, have you something to show me?*

As if in answer, a company of cats burst out of the mist in front of her and streamed past her, all heading upriver. She could see the closest ones clearly, make out the color of their pelts, and pick up their wild, distant scent, but others were no more than blurred shapes in the cloud.

"Come on!" Voices began to echo around her. "We're bound to find somewhere soon."

"My paws are dropping off." The voice of a cranky elder. "And my bones have never been so damp."

"Beechpaw! This isn't the time to be chasing leaves. Get back here right now!"

"We must keep going." The words were low and urgent, and

Poppystar thought she recognized the voice of Birdstar. "Sooner or later we'll find a new home."

The cats pressed on around Poppystar; they all seemed to know that the new home they had never seen must lie upriver. It was a struggle for Poppystar to walk through them against the flow; she tangled with their legs and tails as they pushed her from both sides, almost carrying her off her paws.

Are they trying to tell me I'm going the wrong way?

At last Poppystar managed to thrust her way to the back of the group. An old cat with a scruffy ginger pelt and rheumy eyes was bringing up the rear. As his gaze fell on Poppystar he halted and stared straight at her: the only cat who had noticed that she was there.

Poppystar shivered as he spoke the words of the prophecy to her: "This is the leaf-bare of my Clan. Greenleaf will come, but it will bring even greater storms than these. Skyclan will need deeper roots if it is to survive."

With a gasp, Poppystar jumped awake, scrambling to her paws. Next to her, Shrewtooth started up, her fur bristling as she tried to look in every direction at once.

"It's okay," Poppystar soothed her, resting the tip of her tail on her shoulder. "It was just a dream."

The young black she-cat sank back into her nest. "Are you all right?" she whispered. "Did you have a message from Starclan?"

Poppystar realized that other cats had roused and were watching her; Cherrytail had come off watch and had his intent green gaze fixed on her.

She shook her head. "No, it was nothing but a bad dream."

I can't share this sign with them. Is Starclan telling me that I'm doing the wrong thing?

More than anything, the repetition of the prophecy disturbed her.

Surely she wasn't putting down deeper roots for her Clan by taking off like this to help other cats far away? Desperately she wished that Skyclan's destiny wasn't so obscured by shadows and doubts and so many possibilities. *Nothing seems to be clear, and I'm frightened that it's weakening my Clan.*

Cherrytail held Poppystar's gaze for a moment longer, then stretched out his forepaws and raised his rump in a long stretch. "We're all awake," he meowed. "Why don't we carry on? It should be dawn soon."

"Good idea," Fallowfern agreed. "I think every thorn in this hedge is pricking me."

Poppystar nodded agreement; the Clan deputy called to Sharpclaw, who was keeping watch, and the patrol crawled out into the field beyond. Clouds had risen to cover the sky and there was little light, but the sound of the river guided their paw steps. Dew-laden grass brushed their pelts as they padded through it; Poppystar shivered as the moisture soaked through her fur.

She realized as they continued that Haze and the other Twolegplace cats were clearly growing more tense. They seemed always on the alert, starting at every unexpected noise.

"Are we near your Twolegplace?" she asked Haze.

The gray tom shook his head. "Not yet. But we should get there today if we make good time."

As the sun came up the clouds cleared away and the dew dried from the grass. The day grew hotter, and it was harder to keep putting one paw in front of another with the sun beating down on their backs. With Haze urging them on, the cats kept going until sunhigh, then stopped to hunt and take a brief rest. When they went on, the ground began to slope away from them; the river tumbled over rocks in a series of shallow waterfalls, gurgling into pools where foam spun on the surface.

"The water looks so cool," Sharpclaw murmured. "I'm going to rest my paws in it." She padded down the bank and waded into the

water, letting out an appreciative little trill. "It's lovely! Come and try it!"

The Twolegplace cats looked doubtful, but all the Clan cats followed Sharpclaw into the water. Poppystar enjoyed the cool touch on her paws. *We've come so far, even Skyclan pads get sore!*

"I'm getting out," Rockshade announced after a few moments. "I'm being splashed, and my fur's cold."

"Yes, come *on*," Haze called from the bank. "We'll never get there at this rate."

The river grew wider, with trees shading it on either side. The flow seemed almost sluggish here, after the bubble and chatter of the waterfalls.

"This is where we had the flood two seasons ago," Cinder told Poppystar. "Sandstar and Fireheart were caught in it. That's how we met them: Sandstar came looking for Fireheart in our Twolegplace."

Poppystar nodded; Sandstar had told them the story while he was with Skyclan. She shuddered at the thought of a wall of water thundering down this quiet river. *If Sandstar had drowned, Skyclan would never have been reborn.*

The sun was starting to go down again when the river curved in a wide loop and Poppystar spotted the walls and rooftops of a Twolegplace in the distance. "Is that where we're going?" she asked Stumpy, who was padding next to her.

The brown tabby she-cat nodded. At the same moment, Haze veered away from the river and led the patrol across a stretch of open ground and into a patch of sparse woodland, made up mostly of spindly hazel saplings. Poppystar could detect faint scents of cats among the trees, and tried to decide if any of them belonged to Haze and his friends, from when they lived and hunted here. She picked up one scent that seemed familiar, but it was a she-cat scent, and not Stumpy's or Cinder's.

I wonder if that could be Harper?

Haze led the way through the wood to a narrow, shallow stream at the other side. A fallen tree lay across it; Haze ran nimbly over to the other bank, and the rest of the patrol followed him. The walls of the Twolegplace lay in front of them on the other side.

"Swift lives up there," Cinder told the patrol, angling her ears upstream. Poppystar glanced in the direction she pointed, but there were no cats in sight, and no scents; Swift's camp must be a good way away.

She and her warriors followed Haze down an alley and into the depths of the Twolegplace. Poppystar's pelt prickled as the walls closed around her. This wasn't like the Twolegplace near the gorge. There was crumbling stone everywhere she looked; debris lay in the alleys, and with each breath she took in the faint stench of crow-food.

The Skyclan cats bunched closer together as Haze led them onward. Poppystar felt comfort in Leafdapple's pelt brushing hers on one side, and Sharpclaw's on the other. Their route led around corners, over walls, and through tunnels that led underneath Thunderpaths, until Poppystar had lost all sense of direction.

I hope we can follow our scent trail back if we need to get out quickly.

Haze increased the pace as they headed farther into the Twolegplace, until he was bounding along. Stumpy, Cory, and Cinder ran faster too, their eyes shining. *They're really glad to be back,* Poppystar thought, amazed that any cat could actually enjoy living in this dirty, Twoleg-scented place.

Cory and Stumpy raced past Haze as the cats emerged into a stretch of open ground where a few straggling bushes grew, with the occasional twisted tree. They pelted across the rough grass and into the mouth of an alley on the opposite side.

"Winter! Are you here?" Cory yowled.

There was a pause, then Stumpy let out a gasp. "Tracy! You're back!"

Haze and Cinder raced after their friends into the alley. Poppystar and the Clan cats followed. As they entered the narrow passageway, Poppystar saw the Twolegplace cats crowding around a dark gray tabby she-cat, with a white tom beside her; Poppystar flinched when she saw the raw pink scars around the she-cat's eye. *Swift did that to her.*

"She just appeared!" the tom, Winter, was explaining. "The Twolegs brought her back."

Cory was giving his friend a thorough inspection. "You smell different," he pronounced.

Tracy nodded. "I feel kind of different, too."

Tinycloud shouldered his way into the crowd around the dark gray tabby she-cat and sniffed at her curiously. "You've been to the Cutter, haven't you?" Glancing around, he realized that every cat was staring at him, and gave his chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. "It happened to some of the cats back when I lived in my Twolegplace."

Leafdapple nodded. "You can tell when a cat has been, because when they come back they're really different."

"Yeah," Tinycloud added. "Fatter and lazier!"

Faintly amused, Poppystar wondered when Tinycloud would stop sticking his paw in his mouth. A look of horror spread across his face as he realized what he had said.

"Sorry... er... Tracy," he stammered. "I didn't mean..."

"That's okay," mewed Stumpy, giving Tinycloud a friendly nudge. "She was lazy to start with!"

Poppystar felt herself begin to relax. She had imagined they would be walking into a place tense with the threat of war but this could be the reunion of any Clanmates separated by a longer than usual patrol.

"It's great to have you back," Winter purred. "We thought we'd never

see you again."

"And you found the fighting cats," Tracy added. "That's even better!"

"We're not just fighting cats." Poppystar felt that she had to explain what it was like to be part of a Clan. "We live by the warrior code, and train apprentices to hunt for the whole Clan as well as to protect our borders."

Winter and Tracy exchanged a look. "That's nice," Winter mewed politely, though Poppystar could tell that neither of the Twolegplace cats understood what she was trying to tell them.

"Anyway, you're here now," Tracy went on. "We'll soon show Swift and her friends what's what."

"Has Swift been causing any more trouble?" Haze asked.

Winter's cheerful look died away and his tail drooped. "A couple of kittypets got badly hurt trying to protect their housefolk's guinea pig."

While Haze and the other Twolegplace cats shot one another dismayed glances, Poppystar leaned closer to Leafdapple. "What's a guinea pig?" she whispered.

"It's like a rabbit, but smaller and with tiny ears," Leafdapple explained. "They squeak a lot. And they don't have legs, just spiky feet."

Poppystar found it hard to imagine such a weird creature. "That sounds like prey," she murmured. "Why would the kittypets want to protect it?"

Before Leafdapple could reply, Cory broke in, his voice outraged. "The Twolegs will drive us all out if Swift keeps attacking the animals that live by their nests!"

Poppystar began to understand. For these cats, living on the fringes of Twoleg dens, it was essential not to make the Twolegs angry.

Thinking about that, she missed the rest of the Twolegplace cats'

comments, only paying attention again when Cory asked quietly. "Have you seen Harper?"

Winter studied his paws. "Sometimes," he admitted. "Always with the dark ginger tom."

"Red." Haze spat the name out through gritted teeth. "His name is Red. And he must have tricked Harper, or threatened her, if she's still with him. He needs to be taught a lesson!"

Poppystar exchanged a glance with Cherrytail; she could see her deputy sharing her thoughts. *Haze has a personal grudge against this cat. But still, it sounds as if Swift and her friends are treating the others unfairly. There must be something we can do.*

"How far does your territory extend?" she asked the Twolegplace cats. "And how often does Swift trespass?"

Tracy looked puzzled. "Territory? Trespass?"

"We don't have borders here like you do in Skyclan," Cinder explained. "Cats can go anywhere."

"What about prey?" Cherrytail prompted with a twitch of his tail.

"We eat what we catch." Stumpy shrugged. "If every cat can hunt for themselves, then we should all have enough to eat."

"Then how are we going to stop Swift threatening you if you don't have a border to keep her out?" Poppystar meowed.

"We have to get rid of her once and for all," Haze growled.

Sharpclaw shot Poppystar an anxious glance. "That's not part of the warrior code," she pointed out. "We chase cats out of our territory, and patrol the border to make sure that they stay out. How far would we have to chase Swift before she agreed not to come back?"

Good question, Poppystar thought. She was feeling worse about the battle with every heartbeat that passed. *Just what does Haze want us to achieve?*

"You have to fight her," Cherrytail meowed to Haze. "And we'll help you. Do you have a plan?"

"We'll wait until nightfall," Haze replied. "Then I'll show you Swift's camp. Meanwhile, you can hunt here. There's usually some prey in the waste ground we just passed."

He led the way back to the mouth of the alley. Poppystar glanced around the stretch of rough ground; it felt odd to be hunting for herself, not in a patrol. She watched Sharpclaw and Tinycloud dive into the bushes nearby, while Cherrytail, Egg, and Fallowfern set out for the long grass at the foot of the opposite wall.

From the corner of her eye Poppystar glimpsed movement in one of the scrubby trees; her ears pricked as she made out a squirrel, half-hidden among the leaves. Pressing herself to the ground, she crept up to the tree and clawed her way up the trunk on the far side from the squirrel. She was fairly confident of making her catch; there was no other tree close enough for the squirrel to leap into.

But the squirrel was alerted by her progress through the rustling leaves. It sat straight up on the branch, then took a flying leap to the ground.

"Mouse dung!" Poppystar spat.

Then she spotted Leafdapple near the foot of the tree. Panicking, the squirrel launched itself almost into his paws, and he killed it with a neat bite to its throat.

"Well done!" Poppystar exclaimed, dropping to the ground beside her Clanmate. "That was a great catch."

"You set it up," Leafdapple meowed. "Let's share."

Even in this strange and disturbing place, joy washed through Poppystar from ears to tail-tip as she settled down beside Leafdapple to eat the squirrel.

"Thank you, Starclan, for giving us this prey," she murmured, adding to herself, *Are you still watching over us, even here?*

She took a mouthful of the prey, her whiskers brushing the side of Leafdapple's face. "I'm glad you're here," she purred.

Leafdapple blinked at her, his amber eyes warm. "So am I," he mewed.

Chapter 34

A paw prodding in her side woke Poppystar; she opened her eyes on glaring orange light that cast thick shadows across her sleeping Clanmates. For a few heartbeats she wasn't sure where she was. Then Stumpy's face came into focus as the brown tabby she-cat bent over her.

"Wake up!" she hissed. "Haze says it's time."

Memory flooded back into Poppystar, of the long journey to the Twolegplace and Haze's promise to show them Swift's camp. She stumbled to her paws, realizing that she had been sleeping with her back pressed against Leafdapple. Her movement woke him, and their eyes met for a moment in embarrassment.

Then Leafdapple leaped up. "I'm ready," he announced.

Urgency swept through Poppystar, overpowering her doubts and pumping energy into her paws. She woke her other Clanmates and led them to where Haze was waiting with Cory and Stumpy.

"Let's go," Haze meowed.

Whipping around, he led the way across the waste ground and down another alley. Poppystar and the other Skyclan cats bounded after him, along alleys and tiny paths that led through piles of split wood and past sleeping monsters, with scarcely a glance to make sure that they wouldn't wake. They passed so close to Twoleg nests that Poppystar's fur brushed against the rough red stone.

Eventually Haze led them up onto the top of a small wooden nest. As Poppystar leaped up, she saw saw him crouching at the far side of the roof, staring down at what lay beyond. She padded across the roof and crouched down beside him. The orange light showed her a pile of square Twoleg things, tumbled together on the bank of the shallow stream that they had crossed on their way into the Twolegplace. Its banks were muddy, with only a sluggish trickle of

water at the bottom.

"Those boxes are where Swift lives," Haze told her.

As Poppystar looked more closely, she could make out the shadows of cats slinking between the boxes, and caught the occasional gleam from their eyes. Then a sturdy-looking cat emerged into the open and called out, looking back over his shoulder.

A cheerful chirrup answered him, and a slender she-cat pushed her way out of the nearest box to join him. Although the harsh light drained all the color from their pelts, Poppystar guessed that they were Haze's daughter, Harper, and her mate, Red; she could feel Haze stiffening, and heard a faint snarl coming from the depths of his throat.

It was clear that Harper wasn't a prisoner in Swift's camp; she looked relaxed and happy to be there. With their tails twined together, the two cats strolled across the ditch and vanished into the woods.

Haze had sunk his claws so deeply into the wooden roof that he had to yank them out before he could sit up. His gaze swept over the cats who were crowding up behind him. "We'll attack now," he growled.

"Wait." Cory stepped forward, his ears flicking anxiously. "What about Cinder, Winter, and Tracy?"

"Go fetch them," Haze directed. "If we wait until tomorrow night, Swift will know there are strangers here, and she might be on her guard."

Fallowfern leaned over to murmur into Poppystar's ear. "He wants to attack while his daughter is out of the camp."

Poppystar nodded. She could understand why Haze had made his decision, but she was reluctant to go into battle unprepared. They didn't know anything about the layout of the camp beyond what they could see from the roof of the little den, nor how many cats were inside the boxes.

"Don't worry," Haze mewed, as if he could read her mind. "We'll outnumber them."

His eyes burned with a cold fire; Poppystar shivered, reminding herself that these cats did not live by the warrior code. *They'll kill, if that's the only way to win.*

"I want to take a closer look at the camp," Cherrytail announced, beckoning Egg and Tinycloud with his tail. "We can't go into battle blind," he added as Haze seemed about to object, "and there'll be plenty of time before Cory and the others get here."

Haze nodded; Poppystar felt her fur start to bristle at the way he was taking charge, just as he had done when Cherrytail took the patrol into the Twolegplace.

"Good idea, Cherrytail," she meowed. *Just so he's sure who is Clan leader here.*

Cherrytail flicked his ears in acknowledgement; he and the two cats he had chosen slunk down the side of the nest and melted into the shadows.

"Don't worry, Haze." Sharpclaw's voice was warm with pride in her Clanmates. "They won't get spotted."

While they waited for the others to join them, Poppystar scanned the camp below, but there was little movement to suggest how many cats might be there, or what they were doing. Behind her she could hear Shrewtooth's teeth chattering, but when she turned to give her a word of encouragement, she saw grim resolution in her eyes.

"Don't underestimate Shrewtooth's courage," Leafdapple whispered to her. "I've seen her chase off a fox on border patrol, when the rest of us were stuck in brambles."

"Really?" Poppystar's pads tingled. *Shrewtooth had a bad start, but I think she may turn out to be one of our best warriors.*

Scrabbling sounds on the wall of the nest announced the return of Cherrytail with Egg and Tinycloud. "There are cats in almost all of

the dens," he reported to Poppystar, "but it's impossible to tell how many. We—"

"I told you, they won't outnumber us," Haze interrupted. "Not when the others get here."

Poppystar exchanged a concerned glance with Leafdapple. Nothing was going to stop Haze from attacking. He was telling them what he wanted to hear.

"We need to attack from three sides," Cherrytail went on. "From both ends of the ditch, and from this point here."

Haze and Stumpy were listening closely to what the deputy said. With a shock like a gust of icy leaf-bare wind, Poppystar realized that she had given them exactly what they wanted: the expertise of highly skilled warriors in a battle that might be nothing more than personal revenge.

With a flick of her tail she beckoned her Clanmates closer. "Remember, we fight according to the code!" she whispered. "No cat is to be killed for the sake of victory, and we fight as one, or not at all."

Haze's ears pricked up as she spoke, and he swung around to face her. "What is the point of fighting if you don't mean it? We fight to *win*!"

Poppystar did not respond, just let her gaze travel over her warriors to make sure they were certain whose orders they were following. To her relief, Haze fell silent and listened to Cherrytail describing the terrain along the line of the ditch. Before he had finished, Cory returned with Winter, Cinder, and Tracy.

"Right," Haze growled. "The time has come for Swift to leave this place. She has stolen too much from us!" Without hesitating, he launched himself off the top of the nest and raced across the open ground toward the boxes. Poppystar raised her tail to stop the others following him like a swarm of bees.

"Fallowfern, Sharpclaw, and Egg, you attack from that end of the

ditch," she mewed rapidly, waving her tail. "Leafdapple, Tinycloud, and Shrewtooth, from the other end. Wait for my signal."

The Clan cats moved briskly off. Before he climbed down from the roof, Leafdapple glanced back. "Be careful," he told Poppystar.

Poppystar replied with a nod.

Rockshade and Cherrytail remained with her on the roof, along with the Twolegplace cats. Winter was crouched on the edge, staring down at the boxes.

"I—I don't think I can do this," he whispered, looking up at Poppystar. His voice was hoarse. "I saw what they did to Tracy..."

Poppystar touched his shoulder with the tip of her tail. "Okay, go back to your den."

But as the white tom rose to her paws and turned to go, Cinder stepped forward to block his way. "We're in this together," she snarled.

"Not with reluctance, and not with fear." Poppystar took a pace forward and faced Cinder, her head raised challengingly. "Let him go."

Cinder hesitated for a couple of heartbeats, then stepped aside, her fur bristling and her tail-tip twitching. Winter flashed a grateful glance at Poppystar, then vanished over the other side of the roof.

Staring down again at the camp, Poppystar spotted Haze poised on the edge of the jumble of boxes. His tail flicked impatiently as he glanced back over his shoulders at the others, beckoning them to join him.

"Line up." Poppystar hissed. "Do *not* lose sight of the cat beside you."

He remind felt like leaves falling, whirled by the wind. *This is my first battle against other cats as leader, and I've had no chance to plan the fight. I'm going in blind...*

"Cherrytail, I need you with me," she meowed to her deputy. "You're

the only cat who has any idea of the layout."

Cherrytail nodded. "Don't worry. I'll be on your tail," he promised. "If we—"

"*Go!*" Cinder yowled.

Furious that the black she-cat had given the signal before she was ready, Poppystar had no choice but to obey. The Twolegplace cats were already leaping down from the roof. Poppystar waved her tail to gather her Clanmates, and they streamed over the side of the nest. The Skyclan cats handled the drop best, landing neatly and pelting toward Swift's camp without breaking stride. Poppystar spotted Stumpy stumble, but the brown tabby she-cat recovered herself quickly. Cory had fallen awkwardly on his side; Poppystar paused to drag him to his feet and shoved him ahead of her as they raced on.

As she drew closer to the camp, Poppystar waited for the sensation of cats running alongside her: Starclan cats sharing her battle, just as Sandstar had told her they accompanied him when he fought against Bloodclan. But there was no starry glimmer, no insubstantial brushing of pelts against hers, no scent of the icy stretches of the night sky. Just real, live cats, smelling of fear and fury.

A cold stone seemed to settle in the pit of Poppystar's belly. *Have our ancestors deserted us because this is not our battle?*

Yowls erupted from the other side of the camp, and a small flame of confidence rekindled inside Poppystar. The cats sent down to the ditch must have arrived.

Then a ginger and white she-cat hurtled out of the camp, heading straight for the attackers. Haze leaped on top of her, knocked her over, and held her down, gazing around him with the flame of battle in his eyes. "Stumpy!" he yowled.

When the brown tabby she-cat bounded up to him he left the she-cat to her and ran on, screeching. "I want Swift!"

No, Poppystar thought, *you want your daughter.*

Cory had joined Stumpy to wrestle with the ginger and white she-cat. Poppystar pelt ed past them and plunged into the tangle of nests. The strong scent of cats caught her by the throat; the flimsy walls closed in on her, dark and stifling.

Suddenly one of the nests was ripped open and a huge she-cat with ragged gray fur leaped out, her teeth bared. Poppystar stumbled onto her flank; before she could regain her paws Cherrytail charged between her and her attacker, driving the gray she-cat back in a whirl of teeth and claws. They vanished into the darkness of the den, the walls heaving with the force of their fight.

One flap of the Twoleg stuff collapsed on top of Poppystar; tearing with teeth and claws, fighting back panic, she managed to struggle free of it. As she shook the last straps off her pelt, she found herself staring into a den where three kits mewled and scuffled in a nest of grass and leaves. Their father, a young tortoiseshell and white king, arched his back and hissed at Poppystar, his claws extended.

Turning away—she had no quarrel with kits—Poppystar spotted another den with eyes gleaming from its depths; ahead of it yet another den collapsed, revealing Sharpclaw and a silver and black tom rolling on top of the battered walls in a screeching tangle of legs and tails. Just beyond them, Egg leaped onto the back of a tabby she-cat, clawing her around the ears.

As Poppystar pressed forward, Fallowfern and Tinycloud appeared; they broke down the nests underneath their paws as they drove two of Swift's cats in front of them until their opponents turned tail and fled. Poppystar felt a swift claw-stab of satisfaction that her warriors were working so well together.

"I'm with you, Poppystar," Rockshade panted from behind her. "What—?"

She broke off with a shriek as the cat leaped out and fastened her claws in her rump. Poppystar spun around and flung herself on the enemy cat, raking her claws down her side. The cat let Rockshade go as she turned to face Poppystar, but before the black she-cat

could scramble to her paws a cream-colored tom hurled himself on her. His lips were drawn back in a snarl as he buried his teeth in Rockshade's neck. The young black warrior let out a shriek of pain.

Chasing the first cat off with a pawful of claws slashed across her ears, Poppystar turned to battle the cream-colored tom. She flung him away from Rockshade and tried to pin him down, but the tom wriggled out from under her, slippery as a fish.

"Mange-pelt!" he snarled, baring his teeth at Poppystar.

Poppystar sprang at him, but the tom darted to one side, cuffing Poppystar over her head as he did so. Poppystar managed to trip him, and rolled over with him in the ruins of a nest; the tom's hind paws pummeled at her belly. A half-admiring though slid through Poppystar's mind: *He's a vicious fighter, just as skilled as a warrior.*

Then Rockshade threw herself against the tom's shoulder, knocking him off balance and giving Poppystar the chance to scramble to her paws. She and Rockshade faced the enemy cat side by side. Undaunted, he let out a hiss and leaped right over their heads, to sprint off among the nests.

Poppystar bunched her muscles to spring after him. But before she could move, a nest nearby exploded into fragments and a dark brown tabby she-cat stalked out. Her tail lashed and her fur was bristling as she let out a roar of rage. At the same moment Haze appeared from a gap between two nests and faced her.

"Coward!" the tabby she-cat spat. "You came skulking into my camp like rats—"

"At least I came myself," Haze retorted, stalking stiff-legged up to his enemy. "Not like you, Swift, getting Twolegs to do my dirty work."

So that's Swift, Poppystar thought.

Swift and Haze leaped at each other, meeting in midair and crashing to the ground in a flailing knot of fur. They almost squashed Egg, who was wrestling with a black and white tom; she

rolled out of the way and leaped up onto one of the sturdier dens. Shrewtooth jumped up beside her and the two warriors balanced there precariously for a couple of heartbeats. Then Shrewtooth spotted a ginger she-cat sneaking up on Sharpclaw, who had emerged from a nearby den and had paused to lick a wound on her side. The young warrior let out a screech; then she and Egg jumped down on top of the ginger she-cat.

We work together, Poppystar thought, a tiny trickle of warmth penetrating the haze of battle.

Shrieks and growls rose around her; the cat scent was shot through with the reek of blood. Haze and Swift were still locked together in a vicious, clawing bundle. Dragging her gaze away from them, Poppystar spotted Cherrytail battling two she-cats at once, easily holding them off with Skyclan battle moves. Then a gap opened up between two dens, and Poppystar gasped in horror as she spotted the cream-colored tom grappling with Leafdapple. He had him pinned down; as Poppystar watched he clawed out a pawful of his belly fur.

Poppystar sprang forward to help her Clanmate, but before she reached him a shriek went up from the nursery den. "Please don't hurt my kits!"

Poppystar spun around to see Cinder and Cory stalking toward the nest. The tortoiseshell and white king was backing away to stand over his kits. His hackles were raised and his eyes wide with fear. He stretched out one forepaw, its claws extended, as his gaze flickered from one attacker to the other.

Rushing over to the den, Poppystar thrust herself between the king and the Twolegplace cats. "No!" she yowled. "You can't attack these kits. This is not their battle."

Cory and Cinder exchanged a baffled look. Then their eyes narrowed suspiciously as they stared at Poppystar. "Are you betraying us?" Cinder growled.

Desperation surged through Poppystar. *I can't fight Cinder and Cory! But I have to protect these kits!*

Suddenly Rockshade appeared at her side. Her black pelt was ruffled, and blood trickled from a scratch on her forehead, but her eyes were clear and filled with courage.

"We have to get these kits to safety," Poppystar told her.

"No!" the tortoiseshell king exclaimed. "You're not going to touch my kits!"

Poppystar turned to him, making his voice quiet and soothing. "You have to trust us. If they stay here, they'll be hurt—maybe killed."

The young king's eyes stretched wide with amazement. "But you're on the other side!"

Rockshade stepped forward. "Kits take no sides," she meowed. "They are the responsibility of all of us."

Poppystar felt a stab of pride in her young Clanmate. Flashing her a grateful look, she stepped into the den and dipped her head to the kits' father before picking up a tiny black kit by its scruff; it let out a shrill squeak and waved its paws in the air. Rockshade followed her and picked up another kit, and their father took the third. Cinder and Cory stepped aside as they left the den.

"This is not what we asked you to do!" Cinder hissed as Poppystar passed her.

"We're not here to take orders from you," Poppystar replied, making her words sound clear through the mouthful of fur. She felt confidence grow inside her as she led the way to the ditch, weaving a path through knots of fighting cats with Rockshade and the tortoiseshell king just behind her.

This is how Clan cats fight. We do not try to kill, and we do not make enemies of the weak or the young.

The ditch gaped ahead of her; beyond it, the woods were quiet. Poppystar was about to jump over when she spotted the cream-colored tom break free from Leafdapple and streak toward her. Leafdapple raced behind, his mottled pale cream and brown tabby fur dabbled with blood.

The Skyclan leader had no time to protect herself or the kit she carried. The cream-colored tom pounced on her and sank his teeth deep into Poppystar's neck.

A shriek of horror from Leafdapple echoed around Poppystar. Then pain engulfed her, and the whole world went black.

Chapter 35

Poppystar sensed silver light all around her, encouraging her to open her eyes. She found herself sitting on the edge of the woods, bathed in the warm rays of the rising sun. Battle still raged in Swift's camp, and on the far side of the ditch, cats were gathering around a hunched shape lying on the ground—something Poppystar couldn't see clearly. Leafdapple and Sharpclaw were there with Rockshade, and as she watched, Cherrytail came racing up.

She tried to hear what they were saying, but their voices were oddly muted, and however much she strained her ears she couldn't make out the words. For some reason they seemed to be very distressed. Leafdapple was crouched on the ground, his head flung back and his jaws parted in a soundless wail.

Then the crowd shifted and Poppystar gasped in horror as she saw her own body stretched lifeless in the mud at the edge of the ditch. The cream-colored tom was standing triumphantly over her.

No!

Poppystar jumped as she felt a tail stroke her flank. She turned her head to see a tortoiseshell tom sitting beside her, a look of compassion in his gorgeous amber eyes.

"Spottedleaf?" she rasped.

"Don't be afraid, dear one," Spottedleaf reassured her. "You are losing a life. You will return to them soon."

Poppystar became aware of another cat sitting on her other side, and glanced across to see the light brown tabby pelt of Birdstar. The former Skyclan leader licked the top of her head as if she were a troubled kit.

"We are here," he murmured. "We will keep you safe."

"Did I do the wrong thing by bringing my Clanmates here?" Poppystar asked. "This isn't their battle!"

"But you have skills that you can give these cats to live in peace from now on," Spottedleaf told her.

"And you and Cherrytail have fought together as a leader and deputy should," Birdstar added, wisdom shining from his amber eyes. "Don't keep doubting him, Poppystar. He is as loyal to you and to Skyclan as you could wish."

Poppystar longed to accept their reassurance, but the anxieties of the last moon had sunk into her too deeply, like leaves trapped in the ice of leaf-bare. "It's been so hard!" she whispered. "I don't know what our destiny is!"

Birdstar bent his head toward her. "Your destiny is what you make it, Poppystar."

Spottedleaf's sweet scent wreathed around her, stronger than the smell of blood and fury. "I gave you a life for healing wounds caused by words and rivalry," he murmured. "Use it now, Poppystar."

His voice faded as he spoke, and the shapes of the two Starclan cats dissolved into the surrounding woodland until they became no more than a frosty glimmer, and then were gone.

Poppystar's eyes blinked open and she saw the anxious faces of her Clanmates staring down at her.

"Oh, thank Starclan!" Rockshade's voice rose to a squeak.

"We hoped you were just losing a life," Sharpclaw meowed. "It was scary, though!"

Poppystar stretched her limbs and managed to sit up. "Is the kit okay?" she croaked.

"Yes." The tortoiseshell king replied. "My kits are all safe on the other side of the ditch."

Poppystar nodded thankfully, then looked around until her gaze met Leafdapple's. The Skyclan warrior's eyes were full of love and pain; after a couple of heartbeats he turned his head away, his claws kneading the ground.

We will talk later, Poppystar promised him silently.

She became aware of the screeches of battle still coming from the other side of the ditch. Poppystar struggled to her paws. "We must help them," she wheezed.

Cherrytail padded up and offered his shoulder for her to lean on. "Wait until your strength comes back," he meowed.

Before Poppystar could reply, there was a rustle from the trees on the other side of the ditch. Harper and Red appeared from behind a scrubby patch of bramble. Harper halted, staring in horror at the battle and the wrecked camp.

"What's going on?" she gasped.

Poppystar turned to look across the ditch, trying to imagine how Harper would see the scene. The camp was in ruins, the flimsy sides of the dens squashed or torn, and smeared with blood. In the midst of the debris, Haze and Swift still wrestled, with growls of hatred and claws clotted with each other's blood. It was obvious that the two cats were determined to kill each other.

With barely a glance at the Clan cats, Harper leaped across the ditch and raced up to her father, with Red hard on her paws. Beckoning her Clanmates with a wave of her tail, Poppystar staggered after them.

"What are you doing?" Harper shrieked, standing over her father.

Without relaxing his grip on Swift, Haze looked up; it took him a moment to focus on his daughter. "Freeing you!" he snarled.

"But I'm not a prisoner!"

All around them the other cats stopped fighting, as if they recognized that this was the heart of the battle. Haze and Swift

broke apart; Haze rose to his paws and faced his daughter, while Swift sat up and started to lick her wounds, glaring resentfully at the cats who had attacked her camp.

"What's your problem?" Harper challenged her father.

"These cats have done nothing but steal since they arrived," Haze spat back at her. "This was our home first! They have taken our prey, our dens, and now you!"

Harper opened her jaws to reply, but Red padded up close to her side before she could speak.

"No cat stole Harper," the dark ginger tom growled. "Do you think so little of her? She came of her own accord."

"No," Harper meowed, turning her head to gaze at Red. "I came because of you—because I love you. No cat can make me leave."

Anger turned Haze's eyes into black pools. "This isn't love! You tricked her!" he roared as he sprang at Red with claws outstretched.

Swift as a snake, Harper threw herself in Haze's way. His claw plunged deep into her throat; at once he tried to throw his weight back, but it was too late. Harper crumpled to the ground at his paws, blood welling from the wound he had opened up.

Haze stared down in disbelief, at the blood on his own claws and the gashes in his daughter's throat. "No... no..." he whispered.

For a heartbeat horror froze Poppystar's paws to the ground. Then she rushed forward to crouch beside Harper. "Quick, bring cobwebs!" she ordered.

The words were scarcely out of her mouth before Sharpclaw raced up to her with a pawful of cobwebs, which Poppystar slapped onto Harper's wound. Shrewtooth arrived a moment later, holding out strands of sticky goosegrass from the ditch.

"Here, try this," she suggested.

Poppystar took the stems, trying to bind them across the pad of

cobweb. But Harper's blood kept gushing out. Her fur turned as scarlet as the sunrise behind them, as if her life were bleeding into the sky.

"Harper—stay with me." Red crouched beside her, opposite Poppystar, covering her ears with frantic licks. "Remember the kits we were going to have... tough little gray and brown she-cats, just like you? Remember how we planned our life?"

"That would never have happened," Haze snarled.

Swift sprang to her paws. "Touch one hair on Red's pelt and you'll answer to me."

Haze spun around to glare at her. "Then I'll kill you first."

As he crouched to spring, Cherrytail flung himself at Haze's flank, overbalancing him and standing over him as he scrabbled in the mud. "Enough!" the Skyclan deputy hissed. "Too much blood has been shed already! You asked for our help to drive these cats out, not to kill them."

Haze stumbled to his paws, narrowing his eyes at the tortoiseshell and white tom. "Anything less is a sign of weakness," he spat.

Poppystar rose from Harper's side and padded forward to stand beside her deputy. "Then you have learned nothing from the warrior code," she mewed. Looking around, she saw that all of Swift's cats had been overpowered by her warriors. "This battle is over," she continued. "Swift, leave these cats alone or we will come back and fight you again. Haze, defend your hunting places—learn from Skyclan and protect your prey as well as your dens. Use those parts of the warrior code that will help you to live without shedding more blood."

Haze said nothing, breathing hard and fixing Poppystar with a mutinous glare. But behind him Poppystar could see Cory and Stumpy exchanging glances and nodding. *They have learned something, and they will see that to make their life better.*

"What?" Swift stalked up, a truculent look in her eyes. "You're not

going to get away with this!" she growled at Haze.

Poppystar turned, gesturing with her tail toward Harper's body. The dying she-cat had her glazed eyes fixed on Red; after a couple more heartbeats she gave a faint quiver and lay still, her paws and tail limp. Red let out a groan from deep in his throat and buried his face in her fur.

"Do you think Haze can possibly suffer more than this?" Poppystar asked Swift softly. "There is room here for all of you, if you divide it fairly. Carry on fighting to the death, and you'll only lose what you love most."

With the tip of her tail Poppystar signaled to her Clanmates, gathering them around her. All of them bore the marks of the battle, but she saw with a vast rush of relief that they were all there, all standing on their paws.

Cherrytail padded up close to her side. She exchanged a long look with him, and he nodded solemnly.

"Come. It's time for us to return home," she meowed. With a last glance at Swift and Haze, she led her Clanmates out of the battered camp, across the ditch, and into the woods.

While they were still among the trees, Stumpy raced to catch up to them.

"Thank you," the brown tabby she-cat panted, running alongside Poppystar. "For everything."

Poppystar nodded. "It was our destiny."

A pang of regret shook her as Stumpy turned back to return to the Twolegplace. *If things had been different, we could have been friends.* But Stumpy's paws lay on another path, she knew, helping her friends to rebuild their lives after the devastation of the battle. *That is her destiny. And this is ours.*

The Skyclan cats traveled slowly that day. Every cat was injured:

Sharpclaw was the worst, with scratches on both flanks and a wound to her neck which kept oozing blood. Shrewtooth was limping from where she had pulled out a claw, but she held her head proudly. Egg had a shredded ear, and patches of Tinycloud's fur had been wrenched out.

Poppystar made camp early, under the roots of a tree, with Cherrytail and Fallowfern, who had the least injuries, she hunted for the rest of the Clan, and found cobwebs to put on Sharpclaw's neck wound.

"We'll soon have you home to Echosong," she promised.

The dark ginger tabby she-cat flicked her tail. "Don't worry about me, Poppystar. I'll be okay."

The next day dawned fine, with a warm, sleepy breeze brushing the grass and ruffling the cats' fur. Poppystar glanced around approvingly as they set out again. Well-fed and rested, her Clanmates were already starting to recover. Her paws were tugging her home, but she set an easy pace, mindful of their wounds.

In the heat of the sunhigh they rested beside the river where marigold grew thickly at the water's edge. Poppystar chewed up leaves to make a poultice for Sharpclaw, while the rest of her Clanmates treated one another's scrapes and bruises. Egg caught another fish for them to share, and started to teach Rockshade how to do it; a close friendship seemed to be springing up between the two young cats.

Skyclan will be stronger for all we have been through together, Poppystar thought with satisfaction.

On the final day of their journey, Poppystar realized that Cherrytail had fallen into step beside her. She had been waiting for this moment, and was mildly surprised that it had taken him so long. *Is he going to make one final challenge to my leadership?*

"I want you to know that I'll fight to the end of my nine lives to keep my position as leader," she vowed quietly, before Cherrytail had the chance to say anything. "Not because I think I deserve it,

but because I am loyal to my Clan, and to the warrior code, above all else."

Cherrytail widened his eyes. Poppystar's voice grew sharper as she continued. "The code says that as leader my word is law, and my Clanmates must be loyal to me. If any cat cannot be loyal to me in this way, they cannot be part of Skyclan."

Cherrytail just nodded. "I never expected anything else," he meowed.

"What?" Poppystar was outraged. "When you challenged me at every turn? When you took patrols into the Twolegplace without telling me? When—"

"But I've never doubted that you should be our leader," Cherrytail interrupted. "I've always believed that, ever since Sandstar took you to the Skyrock to receive your nine lives. I challenged you, yes, so I could be sure of your conviction that you were doing the right thing." His green eyes flashed. "What Skyclan needs more than anything else is a leader who has faith in herself. Because only then could other cats have faith in her, too."

Poppystar stared at him, stunned. *I thought he was a traitor! But all her cares about is making our Clan strong!*

"Then you have to accept the daylight warriors," she told him, scrambling her thoughts together. "They are our Clanmates as much as any cat, and they have equal roles to play." Realizing how deeply she believed what she had just said, she added, "So Frecklepaw will be apprenticed to Echosong, just as he wishes, and we'll offer night training to all cats, not just those based in the gorge."

"Eve in the Twolegplace?" Cherrytail asked with a glint in his eyes.

Poppystar let her neck fur bristle up, but inwardly she was rejoicing at teh new relationship that seemed to be unfurling between them. *Maybe I shouldn't have expected him to respect me when I didn't have enough respect for him.* "You'll have to let me think about that. But you *will* show respect to the daylight warriors and include them in all the Clan activities. They are a worthy part of Skyclan."

Cherrytail gave her a sideways glance. There was an edge to his tone as he murmured, "That's our destiny, right?"

Poppystar halted and faced him; the other cats gave them curious glances as they padded past.

"Skyclan's destiny is that we will never live in isolation from other cats," she meowed. "We're not like the forest Clans; we can't shut ourselves off entirely from kittypets or rogues. And visitors will be welcome."

"Just like that?" Cherrytail queried.

Poppystar recalled the havoc that Haze and his friends had almost caused in her Clan. "No, there must be conditions." Excitement tingled through her as she realized that she was expanding the warrior code itself to fit the conditions in which Skyclan had to live. *Are these the "deeper roots" that the prophecy spoke of?*

"Visiting cats must hunt every day," she continued, "but we won't train them for fighting until they have spent one moon with us. And if they bring danger to the gorge, they must leave. Skyclan does not offer itself to the highest bidder as a fighting force." She lifted her head. "We are a proud, independent Clan with a code and honor of our own."

Cherrytail let out a small sigh; then he nodded and touched his muzzle to the top of Poppystar's head. "I am proud to be your deputy," he murmured. He gave her a long look from sparkling eyes before turning away to pad after his Clanmates.

Poppystar stayed where she was for a moment, watching him go. Cherrytail would never be an easy cat, she knew, blindly following her orders. He would always be a tough, challenging presence at her shoulder, with ideas of his own, and he would never be afraid to argue. *We'll have many more quarrels to come, I'm sure,* Poppystar thought. *And that's good.*

Watching her Clanmates pad away from her along the riverbank, Poppystar narrowed her eyes. *There's one more part of my destiny that I need to take control of.* With energy flooding into her paws she

bounded forward until she caught up with Leafdapple.

The mottled pale cream and brown tabby tom turned to look at her, his gaze warm with welcome. Poppystar reveled in the sensation of being close to him. *He was so strong, so brave, so loyal in the battle...* She knew that he loved her, but he had accepted her destiny to be the leader of Skyclan, and nothing more. He was still prepared to go into battle beside her, and forge a path for other daylight warriors to follow.

But Poppystar wanted more than this. If she could choose her Clan's destiny, she could choose her own. She had a deputy and a medicine cat she would trust with her eight remaining lives. Even if she had to step down from her duties while she nursed a litter of kits. In her Clan, her warrior code, there was no law against leaders having a mate, and a destiny of their own.

"Will you walk with me a while?" she asked him. "We need to talk..."

Epilogue

"What do you mean 'What's this?' It's a *squirrel!* And a *meaty* one, too!"

Flamepaw stood in front of the gathered cats with his catch. He didn't see what the problem was. He had caught something after all!

"Flamepaw... the assignment was to bring down a *bird* by *climbing a tree*." Cherrytail told the apprentice. He motioned with his tail toward Flamepaw's siblings. "Mintpaw, Creekpaw, and Sandypaw all managed to do it, why couldn't you?"

Flamepaw looked away with his head hanging low. He didn't want to admit it, but he was actually afraid of climbing trees. Whenever he climbed up, his feet would lock up and he would think about falling.

Leafdapple approached the young tom. "Flamepaw, don't act as if you don't understand the issue. Climbing trees is a *very* important part of being in Skyclan. And you seem to avoid climbing trees at all costs."

Flamepaw flinched as Leafdapple spoke. He knew that Leafdapple must see right through him. As the patrol moved away, he turned to Poppystar. "Poppystar... does this mean I can't be a warrior?"

Poppystar turned to the apprentice with a little concern. "I don't know, Flamepaw. Tree climbing has always been an important part of Skyclan's warriors assessment."

Flamepaw was about to protest when the patrol suddenly stopped. They saw cats dash by and all stood their ground. Getting ready to attack the patrol stopped when they realized it was Harleymoon

and Amber. The two she-cats seemed very distressed.

"What's going on?" Poppystar asked as the two cats approached.

"It was those two dogs again! Terrorizing all the cats in Twolegplace!" Harleymoon said.

"They're out of control!" Amber agreed.

Poppystar turned to look at Cherrytail. They've known about the dogs in Twolegplace for a while, but they knew this was starting to become serious.

"This problem could affect Skyclan if we're not careful," Poppystar announced. "I'll lead a patrol into Twolegplace tonight. We'll take enough warriors to deal with the dogs and put them in their place once and for all."

Leafdapple approached Poppystar and nuzzled her briefly. "I wish I could stay and help..."

Poppystar purred and shared his thoughts. "I know you do. But you need to be back with your Twolegs, Leafdapple."

"Good luck, Poppystar." Leafdapple waved his tail in farewell as the patrol went to head back to camp.

Night had fallen and Poppystar had already picked out the cats for her patrol. "Is everybody ready?" Poppystar asked. Cherrytail, Sharpclaw, Fallowfern, Shrewtooth, and Nettlesplash were all sitting in the clearing. They had promised to meet Harleymoon within the Twolegplace.

When the cats nodded and set out to leave, the patter of pawsteps could be heard behind them along with a small voice, "Wait! Wait!"

Poppystar turned to see Flamepaw racing up to the patrol. He seemed very excited and Poppystar had a feeling she knew what he was going to ask.

"Can I come too?" The apprentice pleaded.

"I don't know Flamepaw..." Poppystar knew this mission would be dangerous. She didn't feel comfortable bringing along an apprentice.

"I'll be good, I promise! I'll do everything you tell me!" Flamepaw looked at her with huge pleading eyes. Poppystar gave in and allowed him to come.

The patrol reached the Twolegplace in no time. The sound of barking could be heard in the distance. Poppystar figured it must be the dogs.

They couldn't pinpoint exactly where the sound was coming from. As they wandered through Twolegplace, they noticed a kittypet sitting on a fence.

"Excuse me," Poppystar asked the kittypet. "My name is Poppystar, leader of Skyclan. I was wondering if you could tell me where to find the two dogs that have been terrorizing the cats around here?"

The kittypet stared at them for a moment, then he gave them a smirk. "The dogs live in a house with a pointed roof beyond the alley and the fence. They like to hunt in the park at night."

Poppystar thanked the kittypet and the patrol set off towards the alley. They split into two groups and started to head off.

"Poppystar, Flamepaw... you two should wait here and watch out for any dogs that get past us, then follow them into the park." Cherrytail told them. Flamepaw looked a bit disappointed to not be included, but both cats nodded and stayed in position.

They heard barking coming from the opposite direction the patrol went. The dogs were heading towards them. Poppystar gave Flamepaw a shove and they ran after the patrol. "Come on! We have to warn Cherrytail and the others!" They rounded a corner and came to halt. It was a dead end.

"What? That's impossible! This shouldn't be a dead end! Unless..." A sudden thought came into Poppystar's mind. Her blood began to boil as her and Flamepaw headed back to the fence where they met

that kittypet.

The kittypet was in a tree looking down at Poppystar and Flamepaw. Poppystar let a growl escape her throat. "You lied to us!" she hissed. The kittypet started laughing and then hissed down at them.

"Serves you right for snooping around places you don't belong! Now get lost!"

The sound of barking grew louder. Poppystar didn't have time to fight with kittypets. Her and Flamepaw ran down another alley. "Maybe we can hide in these shiny things?" Flamepaw asked. Poppystar nodded in agreement as they hopped into one of the shiny things. Almost as soon as they vanished, the dogs rounded the corner.

Cherrytail's patrol kept heading towards the park. On their way they stumbled into Leafdapple.

"Where are you guys going?" Leafdapple asked with a confused look on his face.

"A kittypet told us the dogs were over this way." Cherrytail told him. Leafdapple stared at him.

"The dogs aren't over here, they're in the opposite direction." Leafdapple told them. Cherrytail's face dropped to a look of horror. The kittypet had lied! He turned to Leafdapple and explained everything. "Poppystar and Flamepaw are in danger!"

Poppystar and Flamepaw stayed as still as possible in the shiny thing. They could hear the dogs sniffing around outside as they looked for them. Suddenly a loud bang could be heard, and the two cats were flung out of the shiny thing by the dogs. The shiny thing pinned them against a wall and Poppystar felt a sharp pain in her leg. She must have smashed it against the shiny thing.

"We're trapped in here, aren't we?" Poppystar asked as she noticed there was no opening in the shiny thing anymore.

"Not if I can help it!" Flamepaw said. Poppystar was worried for

him, but knew she had to trust him. Flamepaw wiggled out of the hidden space and jumped on top of the tiny thing to confront the dogs. Once they spotted him he leaped over them and they began to give chase.

Hearing all the noise from the dogs, the patrol had managed to find the dogs and jumped in to fight. Flamepaw turned to see what was going on and his face changed to a look of relief at seeing the patrol. The patrol fought the dogs with all their strength until eventually the dogs ran with their tails between their legs.

The cats began to cheer at their victory. Leafdapple noticed Poppystar by the shiny thing and called over to Frecklewish. He examined Poppystar's leg thoroughly. "Nothing is broken. You just have a bad bruise. You'll be sore, but you're not hurt."

Poppystar thanked Frecklewish and stood up. She waved her tail to her patrol as they all began to head out.

"Skyclan has won another battle!" Poppystar announced as the patrol came back to camp. The cats gathered in the clearing all cheered with joy at the news. "I also have something I would like to do, can everyone meet me at the pool?"

The cats all gathered around and Poppystar sat to speak. "Today four new warriors will be made. These cats have proven themselves to be true loyal warriors of Skyclan. These cats are named Mintfur, Creekfeather, Sandynose, and Flamestripe!"

Flamestripe stared at his leader with a look of surprise and joy. The new warriors were soon surrounded by their Clanmates who began chanting their new names and congratulating them.

Poppystar approached Flamestripe and rested her head on his muzzle. "You have proven yourself a worthy warrior today. I am proud to be your leader."

Finally finished this book! We can now start The New Prophecy! Allegiance and Prologue will be posted sometime tomorrow!